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"JUST IN TIME, MY YOUNG FOX!" HISSED A VOICE AT HIS EAR.

OR, The Washington Spotter.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "FELIX FOX," "TEXAS TRUMP,"
"SILKEN LASSO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DEEP-LAID SCHEME.

JERRY JASPER was one of the numerous claim-agents who infest Washington.

His little office on a second floor on F street was not very frequently invaded by clients, but for all this Jerry seemed to make money.

He was a wiry man about forty, with a sharp nose and a pair of penetrating eyes, and those who knew him best said that he would get along where other claim-agents would starve.

It was getting dark one night a few months

ago when Mr. Jasper walked into his office with a twinkle in his eyes and threw himself into the chair at his desk.

The letter-carrier had just been there and several letters lay before him for examination.

Catching up the top one, Jerry tore it open and glanced over the page before him.

"Ho! the letter doesn't beat him here much if he is on time!" he exclaimed glancing at his watch. "He says he will be here at six, and it lacks but ten minutes of the time now. By Jove! there's a big fee in this case if we work it up satisfactory. Risk? Of course there's a risk! but I've taken 'em before, and always with success—by Jupiter! *always!*"

The remaining letters did not possess the importance of the first one, for the claim-agent threw them back on the desk with an expression of disgust.

The ten minutes soon passed away, and, before another had fairly begun, in walked a man, at sight of whom Jerry Jasper sprang up with an ejaculation of pleasure.

"On time to the second, captain!" exclaimed the claim-hunter.

"I always am," was the reply. "You got the letter?"

"Yes."

Jerry's visitor took a chair, but not before he had closed the office door and slid the catch-lock—a sign that no new visitors were wanted there, just then.

The man was younger than Mr. Jasper. He was well attired in expensive clothes, and was handsome. His eyes were a dark brown and rather large, and his newly-shaven face wore a mustache slightly waxed at the ends. There was an air of coolness about this person that would have made good judges of humanity call him a dangerous man. He seemed to possess the cunning of the fox, and the inhuman nature of the wolf.

"We are entirely alone, eh, Jerry?" asked the caller.

"Entirely so, Buck," was the answer.

"Good! This a scheme which must not be overheard. There's thousands in it for us, Jerry, old boy—thousands! think of it!"

The speaker leaned forward with a glow in his eyes while he talked, and lowering his voice to a whisper, he went on as one of his hands dropped significantly upon one of Jerry's knees:

"He's coming to-morrow night. I've got the scheme more than half mapped out; we'll complete it before I go away. He doesn't suspect anything, Jerry. By Jupiter! the bird is almost in our hands."

"But he may prove stubborn after we've caged him," suggested Jerry.

Buck Bronson's eyes were seen to flash.

"Let him try that game!" he cried. "By Jehu! let him try to beat us at our own game, I say, and he'll learn that the traps of Washington can hold as securely as the traps of New York or any other city."

"How much will he have with him?" asked Jerry with a good deal of eagerness.

"Enough to fix us for a long spell, ha, ha! He will come straight to your office—"

"Here?" interrupted the claim-agent, starting back. "This is rather public for work of that—"

"No, not here. By to-morrow night you will be in another part of the city, in another office, and not as Mr. Jerry Jasper. We'll fix all that in time. It won't take long to prepare the trap, but the preparations must be well made. He is as strong as a lion, and it'll take strong meshes to hold him. He will be met at the depot by one who will know exactly what to do."

"By you, Buck?"

"By your humble servant!" And Bronson leaned back in his chair and smiled at his companion.

"Does the girl know he is coming?" inquired Jerry.

"I don't know, but it is possible that she does."

"I don't like that."

"Because it may excite her suspicions, eh?"

"Yes."

"Don't let that disturb you, Jerry," Buck Bronson hastened to say. "Whatever happens, she will never suspicion us. He may come here and mysteriously and silently disappear, but no trail will be left behind. I know how to play games that can baffle the best spotters in the country. I haven't lived thirty-four years for nothing—not much have I!"

"See here," suddenly remarked the claim-agent. "His very arrival in Washington ought to be unknown to everybody."

Buck Bronson showed his teeth in a grin.

"Why will it not be?" he asked. "I have

made him believe that certain sharks are on the lookout for him, and consequently he will reach the city slightly disguised. He trusts me in everything, I tell you, Jerry. It would take me all night to tell you how carefully I've played this game to the stage it has reached. You know a good deal of the story already."

"Yes," assented the agent. "I can't see how it can fail—the scheme, I mean."

"Fail? By Jupiter! I'd like to see it fail!" cried Bronson. "There's fifty thousand in it to start with, and, after awhile, more than ten times that sum!"

"When you get the girl, eh?"

Buck Bronson's face became a smile.

"Ah! Jerry, what a shrewd fellow you are!" he exclaimed, slapping his companion on the knee. "There's thousands in this game, as I've said before. She is a beauty, and no mistake. Only think of her as the wife of Buck Bronson sitting here before you! Have a cigar."

Bronson drew several samples of the fragrant weed from his pocket and tossed them upon the table.

The next minute the two men were enjoying themselves, and the room was well filled with clouds of smoke.

"At what hour will he arrive?" suddenly asked Jerry.

"At 9:40."

"From Baltimore, of course?"

"From Baltimore."

"Will you go over and accompany him to the city?"

"No; I believe I have told you that I will meet him at the depot here. We'll come straight to the new office in a Herdic. The chair will be ready for his reception. By Jove! Jerry, if we could only get that chair patented!"

"What for?" inquired Mr. Jasper, with dilated eyes.

It would serve a thousand purposes. Lawyers could keep their clients from running to other offices and—

Jerry Jasper burst into a loud laugh.

"You're rich in experiments, Buck!" he exclaimed. "If you ever turn your genius into another channel, you'll astonish the world one of these days."

"Mebbe I'll do it, anyhow! At any rate, that chair is a daisy, as a certain gentleman is likely to discover, to-morrow night. By the way, I'm dry. What have you got?"

"Nothing," confessed Jerry, with a sigh.

"Then we'll go down and drink in silence to the biggest scheme above ground!" laughed Bronson. "The time will come, Jerry, when you can toast the lovely Florence as the wife of Buck Bronson, the Excelsior Sport."

A little while later the office was empty and the door stood slightly ajar.

Empty?

No! All at once a pair of feet came out from under an old-fashioned sofa in one corner of the room and then the hands and body of a boy!

"Gigantic Caesar! another minute and I should have died!" exclaimed the youth, as he got up and stood erect in the middle of the apartment. "My name isn't Capital Ben if this doesn't beat all the squeezing I've ever had. I feel as flat as a dollar of the daddies, for it's a mighty narrow space between that old sofa and the floor. But, I've heard a dandy lay-out, haven't I? I've got onto one of the coolest games that's ever been set up in Washington. Jerry Jasper and Buck Bronson! Ain't they two seraphs with brass wings, though? Going to play a game for fifty thousand first, and then another for ten times that amount, are they? We'll see how things work, my money cherubs. If you had known that Capital Ben was under that sofa, you'd have jumped upon him like two pile-drivers! I'll go bail, if it wasn't lucky that I dropped into your office when I did, Jerry. What a nice man you are! You can hoodwink the Tenth street widow, but not Capital Ben!"

The boy laughed at the end of his last sentence, shook the dust from his clothes and disappeared.

He was a well-built, good-looking boy of sixteen, with much natural shrewdness in his expressive countenance. His movements were quick despite his long confinement in a cramped place under the sofa, and when he reached the street below he started off toward the Avenue.

Lawyer Jasper and his delectable companion were already drinking to "the scheme" in a saloon not far from Jerry's office.

The boy kept on until he reached Pennsylvania avenue, where he was stopped by a shrill:

"Hello, Ben!"

The young detective was approached by a boy about his own age.

"Did you see the accident?" inquired the strange boy.

"What accident?"

"Why, the one that happened in front of the St. Marc, awhile ago."

"No; I saw nothing," replied Capital Ben.

"What was it?"

"A cab ran into a buggy containing a young lady and her mother. Jehu! I jumped three feet high when they struck. They picked the old lady up for dead, and the young one was in a faint. By Jupiter! Ben, it was affecting to see the old one put her arms about the young one's neck, and cry 'Florence! Florence!' so pitiously."

"Florence?" echoed the boy spotter, with a start. "That's the name of the young girl Buck Bronson is playing for! To get her gold is a part of the infamous scheme I heard talked over to-night. Who were the people ran into, Tad?"

"I think the name is Worcester."

"Where do they live?"

"I don't know. The young one, who did not appear to be much hurt, called a cab, and the two were taken home."

Capital Ben seemed to reflect for a moment, then he left his companion abruptly and plunged into the first drug-store he found.

A moment later his nimble fingers were turning the leaves of a city Directory, and in a little while he found a name that seemed to give a new snap to his eyes:

"Worcester, Mrs. Florence; widow. — 14th St."

This was what caught the boy detective's eye.

"Mother and daughter may bear the same name—Florence," murmured Ben. "If she is the Florence who knows the man who is to enter the trap to-morrow night, I'll know it. And, by Jehosaphat, Buck Bronson, I'll balk your infernal scheme! It means robbery, if not murder, and I'm not Capital Ben if I don't cut your claws awful close!"

The boy shut the book and went out.

As he stepped upon the sidewalk, a pair of eyes caught sight of him.

CHAPTER II.

BUCK BRONSON COMES TO GRIEF.

If Capital Ben had used his keen eyes to advantage at that important moment, he might have perceived that he was closely watched by Buck Bronson.

The Excelsior Sport, as he called himself, was careful to look the boy over from head to foot, and at times he seemed about to spring forward and lay hands on him.

But, Ben was permitted to move off without being touched, Buck following him and watching him with a hawk's vigilance.

"Somebody's watching you," whispered a voice at Capital Ben's ear, when the boy detective had reached a spot several squares from the drug-store where he had consulted the Directory.

"Who?" demanded Capital Ben.

"Look over your shoulder," answered Tad, his friend and informant. "It is the big man there in the light hat. He's followed you some distance, to my certain knowledge. Ah! there he goes!"

Capital Ben had not got even a glance of his tracker, and was greatly disappointed when Tad Trimble announced that he had vanished.

"Where did he go?" the young spotter cried, shortly.

"He flitted 'round the corner yonder."

Ben hurried to the corner, but nobody in a light hat was in sight.

"What was he like, Tad?"

Tad Trimble described the man so well that the boy detective could not keep back an exclamation.

"Buck Bronson, for the world!" he cried. "The fellow already suspects me. A year ago, up at the Capitol, I stepped on his toes in a certain matter, and he hasn't liked me since. Well, there's no love lost, Mr. Buck, and a collision with you is just what'll make me happy as a clam at high tide."

"Do you know that man, Ben?" asked Tad.

"I ought to."

"So do I," was the reply.

"What do you know about him, Tad?"

"Nothing very good, you may depend on that. He was going to give me his boot last night."

"What for?"

"I didn't choose to get out of his way on Fourteenth street."

"What! was he up there?"

"Yes, and so was I," with a grin. "Fourteenth street is the street where Mrs. Worcester and her daughter live," murmured the young spotter. "Buck Bronson was up there last night. This establishes the fact that the daughter is the Florence he talked about to Jerry Jasper. Now I'm going to transfer my operations to Fourteenth street."

The next minute Capital Ben had separated from his friend and was on his way to the street mentioned.

The number given in the Directory as being Mrs. Worcester's home was well up the street, and the boy had a considerable walk before him.

On the way he turned aside and entered a small and unpretentious frame house in which he remained thirty minutes and where, as he showed when he came out, he had improved his appearance.

The boy detective made such good time that he soon reached the Worcester house, the appearance of which indicated wealth and refinement.

The front door was open as the night was warm, and the hour was still early, and Capital Ben sprang nimbly up the steps and laid his hand on the bell-knob.

He was about to ring when a certain voice coming from a room alongside the hall caused him to desist.

"By Jupiter! Buck Bronson is ahead of me!" exclaimed the boy to himself. "He must have made good time. Ah! there is the light hat mentioned by Tad, on the rack. Buck is here sure enough, playing his game no doubt."

The voice in the parlor still continuing, the boy spotter of Washington found himself leaning forward and listening with all his might.

All his senses were on the alert; he was eager to catch every syllable.

"I'm liable to be seen from the outside and pulled away," suddenly passed through his mind, and then he crept into the hall and halted in the shadow of the hat-rack and its contents.

"Now go ahead, Mr. Bronson," murmured Ben with a grin. "I'm ready to hear everything. The girl will forgive me one of these days, but you, never!"

"This is not the time for a conversation of this kind, Mr. Bronson," said a girlish voice of great sweetness. "My mother is still prostrated by the effects of our accident on the Avenue, and constantly needs my attention."

"You can answer now just as well as any time," was the reply in a tone which to the boy in the hall contained a good deal of insolence. "There is no use in putting this thing off."

"But I must. You will pardon me if I say this."

"A sentence—a word will settle all," the man's voice replied.

At that moment a voice came down from the second story of the house.

"Florence?—Florence, dear?" it said.

"Mother is calling now," pleaded the girl.

"I will have to go to her, Mr. Bronson—"

"Not until you have answered me," was the heartless interruption.

"By Jove! I could break every bone in your body," grated Capital Ben as he clinched his hands. "Buck Bronson is playing a game that is in keeping with his rascally nature. That girl is going up to her mother, or I'll know why not!"

"Mother needs me. She may be suffering anew," the sweet voice continued. "Surely, Mr. Bronson, you will not show cruelty on an occasion like this!"

"One word—only one is all I want," was the quick retort.

"I can't—I can't—"

"You must! I'll keep you here till I have your answer; then, and not a moment before, you can go to your mother!"

"I'll see that she goes sooner than that, you brute!" cried the young detective.

The next moment he covered the space between the hat-rack and the door with a single stride.

His hand leaped to the knob, he turned it and pushed the door open.

"Let the young lady go to her mother!" rung out the voice of Capital Ben in tones that startled the two persons in the parlor.

The young girl uttered a cry of astonishment at the boy spotter's appearance, the man who held her wrist stepped back and gave him a flashing look.

"Ah! it is you, is it, you young ferret?" growled Buck Bronson as he glared at Capital Ben in the middle of the room.

"It's nobody else, you can bet your boots!"

was the reply. "You will let the lady go up to her mother!"

"At your command, eh?" And Buck Bronson dropped the girl's wrist and advanced in a threatening manner upon the boy. "I've a mind to crush you where you stand."

"Mebbe you'd better try it," suggested the boy with aggravating coolness as he drew up his agile figure and looked the man in the eye.

"I can do it!" grated Bronson.

"That is only your opinion. A trial might convince you that I'm not easily annihilated."

At this juncture the girl sprang forward and threw herself imploringly between man and boy.

"Don't!" she cried, with a glance at each. "Of all things, I do not want a quarrel here."

"Shall I throw the young intruder out?" asked Buck Bronson. "His impudence deserves a gold medal. I'll toss him into the street, Florence—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind, my lord Buck!" interrupted Capital Ben. "I'll leave this house by orders not from your tongue. You might go to your mother now, Miss Florence. She is calling again."

The girl who was a beautiful young person of twenty took a step toward the hall but hesitated.

"It is my desire that you will create no disturbance," she said to the enemies.

"I will not," replied Capital Ben promptly.

"I came here to see you on business, Miss Florence, but I can wait till you return."

Buck Bronson gave the boy detective a quick look at this, and Florence flitted from the room and flew up-stairs.

"You've got more gall than a tramp," hissed Bronson leaning toward Ben. "See here! you don't want to fool with me. Because you are known as Capital Ben, the young detective, you have no license to interfere with my affairs. I've got a notion to throw you into the street."

The boy looked into the threatening eyes of man who seemed well able to carry his threat into execution, but the young champion did not move an inch.

"What are you here for?" continued Bronson.

"To see Miss Florence Worcester."

"On business?"

"On private business."

"You chose a time when you knew I was here."

"I did nothing of the kind. I did not know you were here; however, a foreknowledge of the fact would not have stopped me."

"Hi! what's that?"

"I guess I don't have to repeat the message," replied Ben.

"No insolence, my young rascal, or out into the street headforemost you go."

Bronson took a step nearer the unflinching boy and suddenly raised his hands.

"You've been tracking me!" he cried.

"Not a step!" answered Capital Ben.

"You came in because you knew I was here."

"I did not."

"You want to prejudice the young lady, Miss Florence, against me."

"I don't think anybody need do that from what she has seen of you to-night."

Buck Bronson seemed to get furious at this. "By Jupiter! I'll toss you through the window if you don't leave the house," he hissed.

"I'm not going just yet," and Capital Ben seemed to plant himself with renewed firmness on the floor, but the next moment Buck Bronson descended upon the boy like a sudden storm.

Ben sprang nimbly aside, and when the eager hand of Bronson descended the boy was five feet away!

Buck Bronson uttered an oath.

"Git out, or git crushed!" he cried. "I'm a bad man when they stir me up!" And he advanced to the attack a second time.

Ben could not dodge this time; he was almost against the wall, but seizing a light chair he threw it above his head, and as the sport came within reach the chair came down with all the force of the stout young arm.

Bronson was not prepared for the blow, and one of the chair-legs hit him above the eye and sent him staggering across the room.

As he stumbled against and fell headlong over a rich sofa the young girl came back to the room.

"What has happened?" she cried, with a look at Capital Ben. "I thought you promised me—"

"Yes, I did promise to keep still," interrupted the boy, with a grin. "But, by Jupiter! Miss Florence, I couldn't!"

CHAPTER II.

HELD BACK.

THERE was a look of tigerish rage in Buck Bronson's eyes when he got up without assistance and looked at the young detective.

Capital Ben stood his ground boldly with his hands still grasping the chair.

"I'll have pay for this!" blurted Bronson, clinching his hands. "You don't strike me with impunity, you young rascal! Were it not for the presence of this young lady I'd throw you into the street!"

It was the same old threat, and Ben could not keep back a smile as he replied:

"I'll invite Miss Florence to retire if you wish to try your hand again. I don't court a difficulty, Buck Bronson, but you won't find me backing out of one."

"No," spoke Florence, firmly. "I will permit no altercation in this house. I regret what has already occurred, and I wish you two could be friends."

"That can never be!" snapped Bronson. "I could ring that pullet's neck and I give him fair warning now that I will do it at the first opportunity. He understands me, I guess."

The next moment Bronson had changed his tone and was talking to the young girl.

"I will come again and soon, for your answer," he said politely, but with firmness. "Meanwhile, I must leave you here with that young meddler who professes to have called on business."

Florence seemed anxious to get rid of Bronson, and he was not disappointed when he was not pressed to stay.

He took his departure with a mad glance at Capital Ben which was returned with a defiant smile, and the boy was alone with Florence.

"I don't like that man!" the boy spotter remarked when the door had closed.

"Why not?" asked the girl, eying him with interest.

"He's not got a drop of honest blood in him!" was the prompt response. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"He regards himself such."

"How long have you known him?"

"About a year."

"Now I'm going into another field, Miss Florence," continued Ben. "Have you a friend who is in Baltimore at present?"

The girl smiled and the young ferret thought he detected a slight flush on her cheeks.

"Of course," said he, "but I mean, have you a gentleman friend in Baltimore—one who is liable to come to Washington at this time?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Pardon me, but I think I have a right to ask," was the reply. "Maybe you don't know who I am. I am called Capital Ben, the Washington Ferret. I think your Baltimore friend is in danger."

"No! that cannot be!" cried the girl turning pale. "What threatens him?"

"A calamity which must be averted."

"Indeed it must be!" exclaimed Florence. "I will answer all your questions promptly if they concern him."

"Good! Who is this friend in Baltimore?"

"His name is Ralph Romaine."

"His business?"

"Private banker."

"Are you expecting him in Washington?"

"Not exactly, though if he reads an account of our accident he will come promptly."

"Does he ever come to Washington with large sums of money?"

"He comes here, sometimes, to negotiate private loans."

"What is he like?"

Florence stepped to the table and opened a large album. Before she had turned three leaves she found the boy detective looking on.

"This is Mr. Romaine," she spoke at last, stopping at the cabinet of a handsome young man, apparently twenty-five.

"Has he changed since that picture was taken?" asked Ben.

"Not in the least."

"That suits me to a T!" ejaculated the capital detective. "I think I could pick him out from among a thousand people. I thank you for your information, Miss Florence. I think I have all I want."

"But, why did you want it?" and there was anxiety depicted on the young girl's countenance.

"I'd rather not tell you now," was the quick response.

"I insist!" cried Florence, with firmness, and Capital Ben by a quick move got out of reach of her hand.

"I have to say that insisting will do no good," he smiled.

"Then I will write Ralph and tell him not to come to Washington—if too late to write, I will send you to the telegraph office with a message."

"Even that might not find him."

"Heavens! what is going to happen?" exclaimed the girl, her manner showing that Mr. Ralph Romaine was a very warm friend, if nothing more. "You know more than you want to tell, boy, or you don't know anything."

"Mebbe the latter," grinned Ben, backing, hat in hand, toward the door leading into the hallway. "I think I am equal to the emergency. I have never failed yet, Miss Florence. Won't you promise me not to interfere with Mr. Romaine's coming to Washington if he wants to come?"

Florence gave him a curious, hesitating look.

"I—don't—know—what—to do," she replied, slowly. "If danger menaces him, he ought to be warned."

"He will be and in time, too," promptly spoke the boy. "Will you give me his address, bank and residence?"

The girl's hand moved toward a card-basket, and in a moment it had selected a card which was soon in the boy's possession.

Capital Ben looked at the card a moment and thrust it into his pocket.

"Good-night, now," he said. "Should Mr. Buck Bronson put in an appearance before I get back, please don't give my inquiries away. I don't care to know his business with you, but I must say that I was an unwilling listener to a part of your conversation."

The girl's face instantly flushed and her eyes lit up with a flash of indignation.

That was enough for Capital Ben.

"Good-night," he repeated again at the door. "I hope your mother will soon recover, and that all your future visitors will be pleasant ones."

He fancied he saw the girl smile over his last sentence, but before she could reply, he sprang across the threshold and was out in the street.

"I don't call that a water haul," ejaculated the young ferret, throwing a look of triumph toward the house. "I guess I'm getting onto the game my old friends Bronson and Jasper are playing. They don't know I overheard their plans at Jerry's office to-night. It was a lucky visit; by Jove! it was. To-morrow night the victim is to come in from Baltimore in blissful ignorance of anything wrong. Mebbe if I hadn't struck Fourteenth street when I did, Buck would have carried his point. He wants Florence to marry him. If she doesn't like him, and I don't think she does, why didn't she say so promptly?"

Talking thus to himself, Capital Ben walked reflectively toward Pennsylvania Avenue. He now kept a keen eye out for Buck Bronson, whom he had a right to watch after what had happened in the Worcester House. He fully expected to see the Excelsior Sport leap from behind one of the shade trees and give him another chance to defend himself, but this time without a chair.

"Mebbe Buck has gone back to report to Jerry," mused the boy, and a few moments later he turned into F street and walked toward Jerry's office.

He was not long in discovering a light in the claim-agent's window, and a shadow flitting back and forth told him that something unusual was going on there.

A tree grew in front of the building occupied by Jasper, and the boy detective determined to see by its aid what was going on in the office.

He reached the tree apparently unseen, and in a moment had disappeared like a squirrel among its foliage.

Hand over hand Ben ascended until he was on a level with Jerry's window.

Parting the branches with his hands, he leaned forward and looked into the claim-agent's office.

"Ha! Jerry, my old friend!" cried the boy at a moment's glance.

He saw in the little room before him a man packing a lot of books into a box on the floor. It was Jerry Jasper, Buck Bronson's pard.

"Getting ready to set up an office in another part of the city, I see!" muttered Ben as he watched Jerry. "I believe that was a part of the programme. A few of your books, a wall map or two, and a desk will complete the deception. Hello! you're going to move to-night, are you, Jerry?"

At this juncture a one-horse wagon approached the curb and stopped directly beneath the boy's position in the tree.

He saw a man jump from his seat in the ve-

hicle and enter the open hallway. The next minute he surprised the claim-agent in his office.

The young detective next saw the man pick up the box of books and start toward the door, followed by Jerry, with a wall map. These articles were deposited in the wagon below.

"Are you going along?" the man asked the claim-agent.

"Yes," and Jerry got into the wagon.

"I'm going, too," laughed Capital Ben, coming down the tree, and the wagon and its occupants had not proceeded far ere he dropped noiselessly to the ground, and the lawyer had a shadow at his heels.

The wagon got to going a good gait when it struck the Avenue, but Ben managed to keep it in sight without great difficulty.

He was eager to find the trap the two men had prepared for Ralph Romaine, and his mind was fully made up as to his future operations.

When the wagon stopped it was before a plain brick house not far off the Avenue, but in a very quiet neighborhood. Jerry unlocked the door, and the wagoner carried the books inside.

"It didn't take Jerry long to find a trap," remarked Ben to himself as he watched this operation. "He is agent for property all over the city as well as a claim lawyer, and he knew where to come."

In a little while there was a light in a window on the first floor and Jerry could be seen unpacking the box.

"Now that I've run you down, Jerry, I'll go about other business," decided the ferret. "I've done a good night's work so far, and if nothing happens I'll spoil a pretty little scheme by two of the most unprincipled villains in Washington. They ought not to get the Baltimorean into their clutches. By Jupiter! they shall not if I can prevent!"

Capital Ben stopped in the light of the first street lamp he found, and looked at the card obtained at Florence Worcester's. It contained Ralph Romaine's address.

"I'm not going to depend on a telegram!" the boy cried, putting the card back into his pocket.

"I shall see the man in person. He has fallen into the hands of two money sharks, and the fact that he is expected here to-morrow night by Buck Bronson shows that he is completely hoodwinked."

Capital Ben was determined.

He had never seen Ralph Romaine the wealthy Baltimorean; but what of that?

His life was in danger and that was enough.

Twenty minutes later the boy spotter of Washington glided into the Baltimore and Ohio Depot in time to catch the Express, but just as he was about to enter the cars a hand fell like an eagle's talon upon his shoulder.

"Just in time, my young fox!" hissed a voice at his ear, and as he was dragged away he looked up into the speaker's face. "You were going to Baltimore, were you? Well, you shall remain in Washington and for good! I told you once to-night that I'd not forget you, and I will not, you can bet your head!"

It was Buck Bronson again!

CHAPTER IV.

AN INFERNAL MACHINE.

BUCK BRONSON knew better than to take his little prisoner out through the waiting room to the street for an action of this kind would have given Capital Ben an appeal to the police.

The hand of the Excelsior Sport had closed like a vise on the young detective's shoulder, and he was jerked from the train as it began to move off and hustled from the shed among a lot of freight cars outside.

"Thought I'd forget you, eh?" exclaimed Buck, glaring like a tiger at Ben as he showed his teeth. "You are going with me with no questions and no noise. This is no boy's game if there is a boy in it."

The street was reached in a little while and Bronson hailed the last cab in line above the depot steps.

Capital Ben was pushed into the vehicle before he could notice the number or take a mental photograph of the driver, and a moment later he was moving off.

Buck Bronson sat at his side in silence, and several squares were passed in this manner.

"What was taking you to Baltimore, boy?" suddenly asked the Sport.

"Business."

"What kind of business?"

The young spotter smiled to himself.

"You're fishing for a flounder you won't get, Buck Bronson," he remarked to himself. "You can pull that string all night if you want to; but

I give you a pointer now that it'll do you no good."

The boy's silence seemed to irritate Jerry Jasper's friend.

"You'll open your mouth by and by," he said to Ben. "You think you are playing an almighty smart game, but it won't turn out so smart after all."

Capital Ben made no reply, and the cab moved rapidly along a considerable distance.

When it stopped at last the boy ferret looked out and saw a brick house that had a familiar appearance.

"Just as I expected," he ejaculated to himself. "Buck has fetched me back to his old pard Jerry. I will soon be interviewed by two of the finest scamps in Washington."

All at once a hand seemed to sink into the boy's arm, the door of the cab was opened and he was helped out.

"The fare is on the seat," the sport spoke to the driver and Ben was taken to the house as the cab moved off.

Buck Bronson had a deep settled look of triumph in his eyes. He realized that he had made an important catch—one of the most important ones of his life, and he marched the boy toward the house with the air of a victor.

He did not jerk the brass knob of the door without ceremony.

A light glimmering beyond the shutter to the right of the front door seemed to tell him who was inside.

The next moment he found another door in an unlighted hall and Capital Ben was ushered without ceremony into the presence of the claim-agent, Jerry Jasper.

This important individual was writing in his shirt sleeves at a desk.

He started visibly when the door opened and when he saw Buck Bronson and his captor he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Here's a rat that has no business at large," cried Bronson, thrusting the boy forward, with his clutch still on his arm.

"That is the young ferret of this city!" answered Jerry.

"Ha! you know him, then?"

"Yes," snapped the claim-agent. "He is always meddling with other people's affairs. Where did you nab him?"

"At the B. & O. Depot."

"Getting on the cars?" asked Jerry changing color.

"Going to Baltimore!"

"Is that true, boy?" and the claim lawyer turned his sharp eyes upon the boy detective.

"Your friend says it is," was the reply, and Ben nodded toward Bronson.

"What was taking you thither?"

A faint smile appeared at the corners of Capital Ben's mouth, a look of defiance came into his eyes.

"He's already played the mum game on me," grated Bronson. "Take a chair, boy, and we'll proceed to business."

There stood near Jasper's desk a large arm-chair of peculiar construction. It did not look dangerous, but the boy ferret involuntarily shrank from taking a seat in it.

Bronson, however, pushed him forward and by main force thrust him into the chair.

The next moment, or as the boy touched the seat, his arms were pinioned to his sides by flexible machinery, his ankles were secured from below, and his head was jerked back against the chair and held there by a hard rubber hand that clutched his throat. The infernal machinery of the chair had been set in motion by the boy taking a seat in it.

A laugh burst from the throats of the two conspirators at Capital Ben's astonishment, and for several moments they enjoyed themselves heartily.

"This is one of the inventions whose model is not in the Patent Office!" chuckled Buck Bronson. "It is a little diversion of my own, and you see it works like a charm. You can no more get out of that chair till you are released than you can fly. The mechanism of the invention has been but half unfolded. I can touch a button above your head and have you slowly choked to death."

"You're more devil than I suspected, Buck Bronson," murmured the boy. "But never mind, my two jail-birds. I'll get out of your clutches in spite of infernal chairs and the like, and then I'll show you Capital Ben's best hand."

"You will now proceed to tell us why you were going to Baltimore to-night," continued Bronson. "Go ahead. You can talk very well with the rubber band at your throat."

"If you get anything out of me you'll do remarkably well," was the fearless response.

"Do you intend to be stubborn?" cried Jerry Jasper.

"I intend to keep my own business secrets; if that is stubbornness, make the most of it."

The boy saw a cloud of anger darken the brows of the two men.

They exchanged quick and significant glances.

"Let me warn you that we are not to be fooled with," Bronson said in menacing tones.

"Not for a minute," chimed in the claim-lawyer.

"Well, gentlemen, I am not to be coerced."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Jerry. "He's a slick one, ain't he, Buck? Not to be forced, eh? Won't tell why he was going over to Baltimore to-night? We've got to fix him, I reckon."

"Unless he changes his mind."

Capital Ben gave Bronson a look which told that changing his mind was furthest from his thoughts at that moment.

"Won't you tell us, boy?" asked Jerry.

"No!"

Bronson sprung up and came toward Ben's chair.

"It is coming," thought the boy detective. "These two villains are going to show some new deviltry."

The next instant Buck Bronson stood beside the chair, his right hand resting apparently on the top of it.

Jerry Jasper looked from him to their victim with apparent indifference, though the capital ferret saw that he was waiting anxiously for the next move.

All at once Bronson's fingers began to move, and the face of the boy in the chair assumed a purplish hue.

The rubber band at his throat was doing the bidding of the hand turning the screw at the back of the chair; it was slowly choking him to death!

Capital Ben could not move for the strange devices that held him on the seat.

"My God, these men are devils!" he exclaimed. "They intend to kill me in this monstrous chair, and then they will carry out their plot against Ralph Romaine and the girl, Florence!"

Tighter and tighter grew the grip of the merciless hand!

Capital Ben saw the grinning faces of the two conspirators transformed into the faces of fiends; they danced before him like countenances fresh from the under world.

At last the room seemed to grow dark; a thousand nameless pains darted through the boy detective's body. He thought the end was at hand!

He did not see Jerry Jasper lean from his chair and gaze into the darkened face among the mechanism of Buck Bronson's invention. He did not hear the devilish laugh that rippled over Bronson's lips as he pointed triumphantly to the work of his chair. The young detective of Washington was past seeing and hearing things of this kind.

"Hadden't you better take him away?" asked Jerry, looking at his partner.

"Maybe I had. The chair works well, doesn't it?"

"Splendidly."

Buck Bronson loosened the machinery at the young spotter's throat, and his head fell forward on his breast.

"He is dead!" ejaculated Jerry, turning pale.

"You don't want him alive hustling around Washington, do you?" cried Bronson, giving him a hasty glance. "What if the chair has fixed him for good? It must try its claws on a gold prize to-morrow night. The boy is all right; he is forever out of our way!"

Meanwhile Bronson had loosened the several appliances by which Capital Ben's body was secured in the chair, and then picking the boy up, he left the room.

In a little while he came back, and throwing himself upon a seat near the desk, coolly lighted a cigar.

"By Jove! it was a close call!" ejaculated the claim-lawyer. "When I saw you come in with that boy my heart jumped into my throat. We must make no mistake to-morrow night."

"We will make none," was the confident rejoinder. "Somehow or other that boy was going to Baltimore on business against us. Did Florence send him? No, she does not know."

"He got onto it somewhere," persisted Jerry. "Your eye is blue where he hit you with the chair at the house on Fourteenth street."

"It'll be all right when the fly enters the web," laughed Bronson. "You will be ready to proceed to business at nine to-morrow night. You can be at your other office to-morrow, but

at the important hour you must be here. The chair will be ready for its victim."

"He must not fail to come."

"He will be here, for we have caged the boy who was to warn him. The whole game is in our hands now. Florence would not give me a definite answer to-night, but she would not say no. She knows the grip I have on her mother, and she fears that I will not be crossed."

"And you will not be, Buck?"

"By the eternal heavens, no!" And Buck Bronson brought his hand down with emphasis upon Jerry Jasper's knee. "I can put the thumb-screws on the Worcesters and get money or blood. I prefer a wife first. Ha! ha! But we want to pluck the Baltimore gold-pigeon, and we will do that to-morrow night. Don't let the young ferret disturb your dreams, Jerry, old boy. Capital Ben, as they call him, has run down his last game—for awhile at least. I've got business down-town. Take care of yourself."

Bronson went out, and the claim-lawyer was alone.

For a few minutes Jerry Jasper occupied his chair; but he was nervous; his face got whiter and whiter.

All at once he rose and left the room.

Going out into the hall, which was quite dark, he struck a match, and found a door almost at the end of the passage.

He opened this door and entered a small room, where he found a trap in the floor. He raised the lid of the trap and crept, rather weak-kneed down half a dozen steps.

Five minutes later Jerry was back in his new office, where he picked up his hat and started for the front door.

"By Jupiter! the chair worked almost too well!" he ejaculated, and then he locked the house for the night and strolled down the street with the tread of a man of guilt.

CHAPTER V.

THE FLY IN THE WEB.

"WHERE'S Ben?"

"He did not come in last night."

"Not once all night?"

"He was here in the early part of the evening and changed his clothes."

The two people who exchanged this conversation were a boy about sixteen and a woman past fifty.

The former was Tad Trimble, Capital Ben's friend and pard, and the latter was Mrs. Seeley with whom the boy detective boarded.

It was the day after the events we have just witnessed, and the shadows of another evening were falling around the capital.

Tad had not seen Ben all day and he was anxious. He remembered having seen Buck Bronson watching the young spotter, and he did not entertain an elevated opinion of the Excelsior Sport.

If Tad had seen Ben but once since the espionage he would have thought nothing of his absence, but he had not enjoyed that privilege, and now Mrs. Seeley had informed him that the boy detective had not been home at all.

"Something has happened," muttered Tad as he walked off, leaving the woman very anxious, "and I'll bet my neck that Buck Bronson is at the bottom of the affair. Just let me get my everlasting peepers on you, Buck, and I'll know what kind of a hand you hold, or throw up the sponge."

Tad Trimble was newsboy, bootblack, or any thing that offered a living. He was agile, shrewd and a favorite about the hotels.

Above all, the boy, like Capital Ben, was honest, and congressmen and other men in official station did not hesitate to trust him with important missions.

He did not know exactly where to look for Buck Bronson for he was not familiar with the haunts of the sport when in Washington, but he was determined to find his missing friend.

Tad remembered having seen the face of Buck Bronson at the window of a certain office in F street, a few days prior to the opening of our story.

The occupant of the office was well known by reputation to the boy, and when he set his wits to work after his interview with Mrs. Seeley, he wondered if there was any connection between the Excelsior Sport and Jerry Jasper, the dishonest claim lawyer.

"It might do to work that lay a little while," the boy spoke to himself. "I'll just run up to F though it's not likely that I will see Buck's phiz at the window this time."

In a little while Tad Trimble was in the neigh-

borhood of the lawyer's office, and as he was selecting a proper point for observation, who should walk out of the hall but Buck himself!

"This is bonanza luck!" exclaimed the boy watching the sport as he lit a cigar and strolled leisurely away. "I'll just shadow you a while, Mr. Bronson," and away he went at the sport's heels.

Buck Bronson was attired in a new suit of clothes which no doubt had just excited the lawyer's envy and he walked off in them like a king in his ceremonial robes.

He had not the least suspicion that a boy with a keen pair of eyes was following him, and he led Tad Trimble a long chase before he stopped.

He took the boy into Fourteenth street where he walked past a certain house several times. Once he appeared on the eve of entering, but seemed to change his notion, and at last went away.

After awhile Tad discovered that Buck Bronson was merely killing time. After an hour's promenade he took a chair upon the sidewalk and made himself comfortable.

Every now and then he consulted his watch as if for the arrival of a certain hour. During all this time the boy kept an eye on him; to lose him might be to lose Capital Ben, and the bootblack resolved to keep Mr. Buck Bronson in sight.

Slowly hour after hour went by. Night came down again upon Washington.

At half-past eight a Herdic cab drove up to the gutter behind the Excelsior Sport, and he seemed to recognize the driver. The next moment the seat so long occupied by Buck was vacated, and the cab was taking him down the Avenue.

"This means something," ejaculated Tad darting after the flying Herdic. "Buck Bronson knew the vehicle was to be on hand at half-past eight."

The boy was fleet of foot and it was no trick to overtake the cab.

Used to all manner of devices to get a ride, he seized the cab from behind, and a minute later he was being carried over the smooth Avenue with the man he wanted to keep in sight.

Tad had a poor place for a stolen ride, and it required a good deal of nerve for him to hold on; but he shut his teeth and kept his perch with the resolution of a young Spartan.

The Herdic kept straight down the Avenue to the front of the Capitol when it turned to the left and took through the grounds, toward the depot.

A minute later it slowed up before the depot itself, and Tad dropping nimbly to the ground quickly disappeared.

He was glad that the ride was over; his body was cramped and his hands were blistered.

Buck Bronson alighted and went down into the depot still watched by the boy from a convenient quarter while the cab turned and waited near the steps.

Ten minutes later a train rattled into the depot and began to discharge its human freight.

"The Baltimore Express," murmured Tad as the people came out. "Now I'll see what has become of Buck."

In a short time he was rewarded and astonished for Bronson came up the steps accompanied by a handsome man who carried a small leathern valise.

"Ho! Buck is going to entertain a friend, is he?" cried the bootblack. "I wonder if it's a case of birds of a feather? The stranger doesn't look like a person of Buck's ilk; there's a good deal of the real gentleman about him. Ah! I'm afraid Buck will give me no clew to Ben to-night."

Bronson spoke pleasantly yet with a confidential air to the man as he led him to the Herdic, and the two entered it without delay.

"What shall I do?" Tad Trimble asked himself. "I don't feel like repeating the jolt I've just had; but I believe I ought to for Ben's sake."

Meanwhile the driver of the cab which held the two men was getting ready to move away, and all at once the bootblack darted forward and resecured his old position.

Instead of seeking the great Avenue the driver went up New Jersey avenue and got into F street as soon as possible.

Here Tad, whose hands were already blistered found it very difficult to keep his hold. More than once he felt like abandoning his place; he was being jolted almost to death.

"They're going to kingdom come!" cried the boy savagely. "We've gone a mile already and there's no signs of a halt. The old cab makes such a racket that I can't understand what they're talking about inside. I've heard Buck

say something about 'loans' and 'good investments' which makes me think there's money at the bottom of this adventure. I'll hang on till this cab checks up if it's in Tampa. This is all for Capital Ben: I must not forget this for a single minute."

The long journey ended at last, just when Tad was ready to drop from his perch from sheer exhaustion. As the cab drew toward a curb, he left his place and concealed himself behind a tree.

The Herdic had halted before a brick house, very plain in appearance as far as the boy could see.

A light glimmered beyond the shutter of one of the lower windows.

The two men got out and went toward the door, the stranger with the leathern valise in his hand.

Tad saw them enter the house.

"I guess that ends the play," muttered the bootblack spy. "No Capital Ben here," and he saw the vehicle move off, with considerable chagrin.

Persevering up to this moment, Tad Trimble began to feel that his labor had been in vain. He had started out to shadow Buck Bronson, in hopes of finding the boy ferret of Washington; but the actions of the Excelsior Sport had not rewarded him.

Instead of getting a clew to Capital Ben's whereabouts, he had seen Buck meet a man at the depot and escort him to a certain house.

It looked like a matter of business between the sport and the man, who seemed quite willing to be conducted to the place.

"I guess I'll go back," remarked the boy. "If Ben doesn't put in an appearance to-morrow, I'll put this case into better hands than mine. But ere I go, I'll try to get my peepers beyond that shutter."

The young shadower crept up to the window and put his eyes to the shutter, but to his chagrin he discovered that a heavy curtain hung between him and the occupants of the room beyond, if it had any at that moment.

All at once, a voice from the inside sent a thrill through the boy.

"For God's sake, gentlemen—"

That was all!

The sentence was broken so suddenly that Tad Trimble started back with a cry he could not suppress.

"What does that mean?" he cried. "I never heard a voice like that before. Something crooked is going on in there; some dark work, with Buck Bronson at the bottom of it!"

The boy listened again, but heard no repetition of the imploring cry.

After awhile he went to the door and tried the knob cautiously, but the portal was firm—locked!

"I'm going to see the end of this!" cried Tad.

"By the ghost in Hamlet! if Buck Bronson is playing a cool game for money, I will know what it is! I've got a friend on the police who would want nothing better than to corral Buck in some meanness. I know where to find him, and I'll go at once."

Tad Trimble drew back from the house considerably excited.

He was directly beneath a window in the second-story, and if he had looked up he might have seen a figure leaning over the sill.

It was the figure of a man half-way out of the window, and in the right hand was an object like a piece of wood.

All at once the man overhead grated his teeth till they emitted an ominous sound, the right hand went backward till it almost touched the house, and then something was hurled straight at the boy on the sidewalk!

The next second, with a half-suppressed cry, Tad, the bootblack spy staggered against the nearest tree and sunk to the ground like one dead!

All this was the work of a second.

The body in the window disappeared with the swift fall of the boy, but a minute later a man darted from the house and snatched Tad from the sidewalk.

"Here's another one, Jerry!" exclaimed Buck Bronson, as he appeared in a room occupied by the claim-lawyer.

He held the inanimate and bleeding figure of Tad Trimble in his arms.

"It is the Washington Ferret!" cried Jerry Jasper, turning white.

"Not by a long shot!" was the reply. "This boy is a fellow entirely different from the young rat we fixed last night, and I bagged him in the nick of time, too. Take up the lamp and follow me. We'll give Capital Ben some company."

Buck Bronson did not notice that Jerry's

hand shook violently when he picked up the lamp on the desk.

The two men left the room, Buck carrying his victim. They went to the trap-door which we have seen Jerry raise, and descended the steps into a dark basement.

"Hold the light down, Jerry," commanded Buck. "I want to lay this one beside his pard. Ah! here we are."

The claim-lawyer held the lamp down, but did not lean forward himself.

"Why, there's nobody here!" cried Buck.

A wild exclamation leaped from Jerry Jasper's throat.

"Nobody—here?" he gasped.

"That's what I've said," growled the Excelsior Sport. "Look for yourself. The boy ferret is gone!"

It looked as if the claim-agent would sink into the hard ground at his feet. Great beads of perspiration started out on his forehead; he lost every vestige of color.

"Gone!—Capital Ben gone? Then, by heavens! we're in for it, Buck," he cried.

Buck Bronson let slip a furious oath.

"Not yet! We'll win this game in spite of the Washington Shadow!" he hissed.

CHAPTER VI.

FOUND.

CAPITAL BEN was missing.

Even after his experience with the terrible chair he had effected his escape in some unexplained manner.

The two rascals—Jerry Jasper in particular—could hardly realize that the young spotter had got out of their clutches.

The whole house was subjected to a close examination; but throughout Buck Bronson put on a bold air, and even laughed at times at his companion's fears.

When pushed to the wall, as he was likely to be ere long if Capital Ben had escaped fit for duty, the claim-lawyer would fight like a tiger.

"If the boy is at large I will run him down before we make another move," remarked Buck Bronson when the search had been concluded.

"The haul we made to-night is a big one, of course, but nothing like the one I'll make for both of us on Fourteenth street in a short time."

"The boy first," persisted Jerry.

"He troubles you a good deal," laughed Buck.

"I acknowledge that. I know something about him," was the reply.

"Then, to please you, Jerry, I begin on him at once. If he is on the street he can't do anything right away."

"Why not?"

"The choking he got in the chair will upset him for awhile. He probably went home."

"Where is that?"

"He boards with a Mrs. Seeley on E street."

"You know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Then you want to lose no time in going there."

"I will not."

"But you don't want to go as Buck Bronson."

"Leave that to me, Jerry," laughed the Excelsior Sport, and then, with a few words of instructions the lawyer was left alone.

It was nearly eleven when Mrs. Seeley had a caller who was wholly unexpected.

He was a well-dressed man with a full beard, which Buck Bronson had not, and, on the whole, quite prepossessing in appearance. Mrs. Seeley kept a few room boarders in her quiet house; they were single gentlemen of humble means, and Capital Ben was the youngest.

Mrs. Seeley had not retired when the bell announced the late visitor, and she met him in the hall.

"I call to obtain the services of a boy who boards here, I am told," spoke the caller. "I believe he is known on the street as Capital Ben, and I have been referred to him by a member of the police."

"The boy is here. I have just come from his room," answered Mrs. Seeley. "But just now he is in no condition to help anybody."

"Ah! is the boy sick?" ejaculated the inquirer.

"He is in bad condition. He came home awhile ago entirely out of his head; he has fallen into the hands of some enemies, I'm afraid. His throat is all swollen, and just now he is in a high fever."

Mrs. Seeley did not see the eyes of her visitor get a new glitter.

"Could I see the boy?" he asked, meekly. "I am something of a doctor myself—"

"Oh! you are, eh? Then I will be glad to show you in, for Doctor McPherson is overdue, and I fear Ben needs attention."

The unsuspecting woman led the man into a small room on the second floor where, on a low bed, lay the figure of a well-built boy.

It was Capital Ben.

A lamp burning on a stand at the head of the couch threw a light over the young detective's face.

The late caller leaned forward and looked into it with a great deal of interest, as Mrs. Seeley thought.

"When did he get home?" asked the man.

"About half-past eight to-night."

"Entirely confused, you say?"

"Out of his head, altogether. He said something about Baltimore and Florence, but we connect his sentences."

"Poor fellow!" ejaculated the man, though his eyes gave the lie to the expression of sympathy.

"Can you do anything for him? He seems to be suffering. Doctor McPherson's fever-drops on the table there do not seem to have the desired effect."

"Bring me a piece of linen, well wetted," said the man.

"You shall have it." And Mrs. Seeley hurried from the room.

The next moment a change came over the countenance of the visitor.

His eyes seemed to snap and his hands shut tightly as he leaned toward the boy again.

"I was right, my boy ferret," he cried. "I told Jerry you had probably come back to Mrs. Seeley's, and here you are, sure enough. It's a blessed thing you landed here out of your head—a blessed thing for us, I mean. I'm not going to take any chances. While I have you in my clutches, I am going to make the most of it."

He turned from the bed and leaned over the little stand near by.

A moment later he took a small vial from an inner pocket and uncorked it over the tumbler containing the fever-drops.

The vial contained some colorless liquid, a few drops of which the man let fall into the medicine.

Having done this, he returned the vial to his pocket.

This operation had hardly been completed when Mrs. Seeley came back with a basin and some linen.

The man went to work and made two moist bandages which he placed about Capital Ben's wrists without disturbing him.

"Thanks; you are very kind," said the landlady when the operation had been performed.

"I think this will quiet him."

"It will have that effect," was the reply.

"When he wakens you will administer a good dose of Doctor McPherson's fever drops. I have examined them and they are all right. Remember! don't forget the drops when he wakens."

Mrs. Seeley promised prompt compliance with the orders, and the man drew back and looked at the boy.

"I will call again—to-morrow probably—to see after him, and if he is in condition to talk I will make known my business. You need not tell him that I called; it might worry him."

There was a look of unconcealed triumph in the eyes of the speaker as he walked from the room and left the house.

"Talk about luck," he chuckled to himself. "This is what I call a gold mine of it. Jerry would jump out of his boots if I were to tell him my adventures. Doctor McPherson is liable to be surprised at the action of his fever medicine, but Dr. Bronson knows what he is doing. Doctor Bronson!—ha, ha, ha!"

The double-dyed rascal had not proceeded far when Capital Ben awoke and fastened his eyes on Mrs. Seeley who sat at the head of the bed.

"I feel better," exclaimed the boy detective. "I am better. I am going to turn the tables on the two sharks."

The woman tried to quiet him, but he laid one of his hands on her own and went on:

"You don't know how they entrapped me. It would be a long story if I went into details. I have sat in one of the most rascally inventions of the age—a chair that has hands like a human. I am going back to the trail right away. This is the night for their infamous play—this is the night for Ralph Romaine to come from Baltimore. What time is it?"

He glanced at the clock as he spoke and almost leaped from the bed with a wild cry.

"It is past eleven and he was to reach the city at nine!" he cried. "My God! you don't

know what is at stake in this game; it is more than money, Mrs. Seeley—it is human life!"

"He is out of his head again," murmured Mrs. Seeley who was a woman of powerful physique, and she pushed the young detective firmly but gently back upon the bed. "You will get all right if you obey the doctor," she went on. "It is time for your drops."

"It is time I should be on the trail!" he cried. "You don't know what has happened, Mrs. Seeley. I was in an infernal chair when my senses seemed to leave me, but I am all right now. I am going to play my hand."

"Not to-night," replied Mrs. Seeley with resolution, and then she fell to pleading with the boy.

She told him that Doctor McPherson had promised to drop in between eleven and twelve, as he had an important case near by, and that he had better wait till then.

"I'll wait twenty minutes," Ben continued. "If the doctor isn't here by that time, I go."

Mrs. Seeley appeared satisfied and turned to the table from which she lifted the tumbler containing the doctored drops.

"What's that?" asked the boy detective.

"Fever drops."

"Doctor McPherson's medicine?"

"Yes."

"All right. Give me the whole lay-out at once!"

Mrs. Seeley laughed, but took up a spoon and made ready to administer the medicine.

Capital Ben rested himself on his elbow and waited for the do e.

"Don't give him that!" suddenly rung out a voice that startled Mrs. Seeley and the young spotter. "The man put something in it. I saw him do it!"

The voice came from beyond the open door, and the occupants of the room saw a young girl leaning over the railing of the stair.

"It is the girl, Sally," said Mrs. Seeley to the boy. "She walks in her sleep sometimes."

"Don't give him that medicine, I say!" cried the girl again. "The man poured something in it when you were out, Mrs. Seeley."

"What man?" asked Ben drawing back from the dose about to be given. "Who has been here? Tell me, Mrs. Seeley."

The woman hesitated.

The man who had just left had told her not to mention his visit to the young detective.

"He was a man I don't like," spoke the girl, appearing at the door at this moment. "I got awake awhile ago and found myself on the stair. I saw Mrs. Seeley go out leaving a man in the room here. He didn't look at all like Doctor McPherson, so I watched him. I saw him bend over Mr. Ben and mutter something I couldn't understand. Then he took a little vial from his pocket and poured a few drops from it into the tumbler there. I saw him do all that."

Capital Ben caught Mrs. Seeley's eye at that moment.

Did you admit this man?" the boy asked.

"I did."

"Was he looking for me?"

"He was; he said he was referred to you by a member of the police. When I told him you were sick he became very anxious to see you, and as he said he was something of a doctor, I admitted him."

Capital Ben was intensely interested in this man.

"Describe him," he said to the landlady.

Mrs. Seeley did so.

"I think I know him," replied capital Ben, but to himself he went on in a different strain: "On the track again, eh, Buck Bronson? I'm no more out of your clutches than you are on hunt of me. What a fine doctor you are!—one of those who always kill their patients. I'll bet my head that Doctor McPherson's fever drops are not harmless now. This girl, Sally, has saved my life."

"I'll throw this medicine away if that man touched it," suddenly spoke Mrs. Seeley.

"You will do nothing of the kind," and the hand of Capital Ben clutched the woman's arm. "I'll make that glass and its contents worth their weight in gold to Justice. You will keep them as they are at this moment. My head is all right again though my throat is sore, and my limbs feel like they've been through a windmill. I'll be on deck to-morrow, then look out!"

CHAPTER VII.

A RASCAL CORNERED.

THE reader can readily imagine that the Excelsior Sport walked from Mrs. Seeley's boarding-house confident that his infamous order would be carried out to the letter when Capital Ben awoke.

He was in high spirits, and for a while he thought of rousing Jerry Jasper to acquaint him with his sudden success.

"It was a master stroke, by Jericho!" ejaculated Buck. "I found the young ferret just in the nick of time, and I added something immortalizing to Doctor McPherson's fever drops. You don't catch this fowl for a spring chicken, not much, trala! ha, ha!"

The next day found Jerry Jasper's office on F street closed, and a sign on the door informed callers that the claim-agent was "out of town."

In the afternoon Miss Florence Worchester of Fourteenth street received the following dispatch dated at Baltimore a short time prior to its delivery in Washington:

"Have you seen anything of Mr Romaine? He went to Washington last night at 8:10. Intended to call on you.
H. H. TREGO."

Florence knew that Trego was the junior member of the private banking-house of Romaine & Trego, and the dispatch naturally excited her.

She replied that she had not seen Mr. Romaine at all, and then Capital Ben's visit, his suspicions and promises, flashed across her mind.

The dispatch established the fact that Ralph Romaine had left Baltimore the previous evening for Washington, and it also told her that his partner was anxious, if not suspicious.

"What if he came and fell into foul hands?" the young girl remarked to her mother. "That boy was suspicious; he seemed to think that Ralph was to be decoyed to the city for a purpose. He promised me that he should not leave Baltimore, but he did leave. In heaven's name, mother, what has happened? Something terrible, no doubt!"

A little later in the day a man of about thirty-five presented himself at the Worcester house and introduced himself to its occupants as Henry Trego of the banking establishment of Romaine & Trego, Baltimore.

"What could have brought Mr. Romaine to Washington at night?" asked the anxious girl.

"Business," replied Mr. Trego sententiously, and then he went on: "Certain parties here have been seeking a loan of fifty thousand dollars. We agreed to accommodate them; the preliminaries were fixed before Mr. Romaine left Baltimore. All that was wanting was the delivery of the money, and he came over for that purpose."

"With the money on his person?"

"Yes; he carried the fifty thousand in a small leather valise. He was to have been met at the depot by one of the contracting parties, a gentleman named Dubois. We had reasons for believing that our client was a man of respectability. He had letters from several well known members of Congress, and always acted the gentleman. He was to give as security some valuable property in this city which was to be transferred to Mr. Romaine before his return."

Florence noticed a change in Mr. Trego's tone before he concluded.

It seemed to her that he doubted the honesty of Dubois; she knew she did, herself.

To the girl it was all the operation of some villainous conspiracy, and when the banker finished she gave him an account of Capital Ben's visit.

This seemed to fully open Mr. Trego's eyes.

"Where is this boy?" he asked.

"I do not know; he has not been back since. He is undoubtedly a well-known character of Washington, and, as such, cannot be hard to find."

"He shall be found at once!" cried the Baltimorean. "I do not want any publicity of this matter if it can be avoided, for it might damage our house; but if no clew to Ralph is found by sundown, the matter will be placed in the hands of the police. I am inclined to think there has been some crooked work."

"Inclined to think so?" exclaimed Florence, unconsciously repeating the words just spoken.

"Beyond question there has been foul play. I would not hesitate a moment. This case ought to go to the authorities at once."

"We will wait till sundown," was the response.

The girl showed her displeasure at Henry Trego's decision, and when he had taken his departure, she turned to her mother with a flash of indignation in her eyes:

"This man is going to let crime take all the string it wants!" she ejaculated. "Henry Trego values the reputation of his business above human life. A crime has been committed. Ralph, our friend, has fallen into the clutches of evil-doers. The whole loan is a sham; this man Dubois is somebody else. He has played his cards for the fifty thousand dollars. I shall not let the matter rest."

"What will you do?" quietly asked Mrs. Worcester.

"I will set the authorities on the trail. They cannot strike it a moment too soon. In the hall near the hat-rack I found a piece of paper after the boy left. The writing on it was hastily scribbled, and read thus: 'At the office, F street, 8:30.'"

"What does that mean, Florence?"

"I hardly know. It might have fallen from Mr. Bronson's pocket, and the boy may have dropped it."

"Was there nothing else on the paper?"

"It seems to have been the top of a letter-head, for on the back of it was printed 'No. — F street,' and then under it the words 'Claim Agent, Room 29.'"

"The claim-agent may be Mr. Bronson's friend."

"I will find out."

"But why? What good will this discovery do you, Florence?"

"Ah! mother, we do not believe Buck Bronson to be an angel of light!" exclaimed the young girl with a faint smile. "You know that he is the possessor of a secret that concerns our happiness. He will not scruple to make use of his power. I can never become that man's wife, and yet he can almost force me to by holding the secret over my head. Why did we ever meet that man?"

For a moment there was a painful silence between mother and daughter.

"I am going over to F street," continued Florence. "I want to know what kind of a man occupies Room 29. I have a terrible suspicion against Buck Bronson. Heaven forgive me if I am wrong!"

Mrs. Worcester did not interpose to restrain Florence, and in a little while the girl was on her way to F street.

Florence was eager to reach the place, and when she did so she found a large building occupied, as various signs at the hall entrance told her, by lawyers and claim-agents.

Going up-stairs to the first landing, she found Room 29 with little difficulty.

On the closed door was a sign reading: "Jeremiah Jasper. Claim Agent and Attorney-at-Law," and under it in large characters the words: "Out of town."

Florence went away disappointed.

As she was about to descend to the street, a young man came out of a room near the head of the stairs and asked her if she wanted anything.

"I wanted to see Mr. Jasper," answered Florence.

"He left this morning; said he might be gone some days. It's kind of singular, too. Jerry is not given to sudden flights."

The last sentence had a strange sound to the girl, but she made no reply and left the building.

"Jupiter Pluvius! what does that mean?" cried a man who saw Florence step upon the sidewalk.

"Shades of Caesar! but that's the Worcester girl, and no mistake. Something's up. Maybe I had better get 'out of town' as rapidly as possible. What fetches her to this part of the city?"

Nobody would have recognized Jerry Jasper in the person who made use of these words.

A full beard and new clothes had completely altered his appearance. He would have deceived those most intimately acquainted with him, and of course Florence, who had never seen him to her knowledge, was not likely to know him.

"I would have jumped the town when Buck did, only I've got to get back into my office before I go," Jerry continued. "I can't do that till after dark, or some of the boys might recognize me. We're pretty well fixed now, but Jupiter! I feel like a pullet on a hot griddle all the time. Buck knows when to make himself scarce for a few days, and by this time he's out of the district disporting himself in new pastures."

By this time Florence had got quite out of sight, although the sharp eyes of the rascally lawyer had followed her some distance.

Jerry continued to hover in the vicinity of his office till night came, and the occupants of the rooms in the building shut up and went home one by one.

It was nearly eight o'clock when, on tip-toe, Jerry Jasper stole up the steps and inserted a key into the lock of his door.

"A fellow's got to be almighty cautious these times," chuckled Buck Bronson's pard, as he crept into the silent little office and found his way to the desk. "I've been in ticklish places before, but this one plucks the plum over them all. There needn't be no fears, though, if we

play it clear through. I'm willing to quit now with what we've already got; but Buck isn't going to stop short of the girl and her money. I'll be no one-horse claim-agent after that event—not much!"

Jerry fumbled through the desk for several minutes, and uttered a growl because he could not find what he wanted.

"It'll do no harm to turn the gas on just a little," he resumed to himself. "I've got to have some light here, for there's a paper or so I can't trust here during my absence. I was a fool for forgetting them when I went off this morning."

So Jerry struck a silent match and turned on the gas "just a little," then he went to work at the desk.

At last he found the object of his search, a legal-looking document, and thrust it into an inner pocket.

"Now for the hiding-place till the affair blows over!" he exclaimed, closing the desk.

"Have you got a good one, Jerry?"

The villainous lawyer almost leaped from his chair. Every vestige of color fled from his face, and his eyes seemed about to fly from his head.

"You?" he cried, glaring at the person who stood in the doorway. "Where did you come from? Buck told me—"

"That he doctored my fever-drops, eh, Jerry?" was the interruption.

The claims lawyer did not speak.

He looked like a person who had suddenly lost power to articulate; to the boy in the door he was a ludicrous object.

"I guess I'll come in, Jerry," continued the visitor, as he advanced into the office. "You don't have infernal chairs here, I hope. Now, Mr. Jasper, you will tell me two things: What has become of Ralph Romaine, of Baltimore, and where is Buck Bronson?"

Capital Ben, the city ferret, had halted within three feet of the astonished man at the desk, and his keen black eyes transfixed him.

"This is a deep game, and somebody is liable to swing for it," the young sleuth went on, sternly. "Therefore, it behooves you to make a clean breast of the whole matter, Mr. Jasper. You are as deep in it as Buck Bronson."

For a second the lawyer looked at the boy, and then a tigerish flash filled his eyes.

The next moment he sprang up with a cry of rage, and before Capital Ben could meet the attack he was upon him like a wild beast!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE OLD TRAP.

WHEN cornered, Jerry Jasper would fight, and cornered he now was by one who knew of his crimes.

As we have just said, the attack was so sudden and ferocious that the young sleuth could not resist it.

"You've got more lives than a cat!" hissed the desperate lawyer at Capital Ben's ear. "You'll have to look out now, for the man what's got hold of you is no slouch!"

Ben already knew this, for the grip of the rascal was like the full force of a vise, and he resolved to meet it to the best of his ability.

"You'll find me no child, Jerry," muttered Ben; and he began to combat the man with a strength which he did not seem to possess.

The two went to the floor, with the lawyer on top, but the boy managed to avoid the hand that sought his throat for the purpose of administering a deadly choking.

The tussle was making considerable noise, which the claim-agent did not want.

What if somebody should rush in upon the scene and discover him (Jerry) in a false beard and new clothes? What if the boy should denounce him to whoever might come?

This would never do.

"Confound him! we'll get him some other time," ejaculated Jerry, and then, not without some difficulty, he disengaged himself from the fight, seized his hat and rushed out, leaving Capital Ben in possession of the field.

The boy detective realized in an instant that Jerry was gone.

"I can't afford to lose that man," cried Ben, springing up. "He will tell Buck Bronson that I am still on the trail, and the two will slope."

The boy hurried below to the sidewalk, but Jerry was already out of sight.

"I lost him after all," muttered Ben with a good deal of disappointment in his tone. "I thought I knew Jerry Jasper pretty well, but I find I do not. I did not think he would show fight under the circumstances; I rather thought

my accusation would cow him. He showed his teeth, though, didn't he? After all, he is the kind of a pard Buck Bronson needs."

Capital Ben walked away in no happy frame of mind, and scarcely knowing in what direction he was moving, he reached Pennsylvania avenue before he was aware of it.

"Ain't you Capital Ben?" asked a voice at his side.

The boy looked up and saw a well-dressed and good-looking man of thirty-five.

"My name is Trego," continued the man. "And I've been looking for you ever since I came to Washington."

"Are you Trego, of the firm of Romaine & Trego, bankers, Baltimore?"

"I am."

"Well, have you found your partner?"

There was a faint smile at the corners of Ben's mouth as he put the question.

"No. That is what I want to see you about," was the answer. "I suspect foul play."

"He came here, then?"

"Yes."

"On business, I suppose?"

"A Mr. Dubois wanted to borrow fifty thousand dollars."

Capital Ben gave utterance to a prolonged whistle.

"They struck him pretty high," he ejaculated.

"They?—whom do you mean?"

"Why, the rascals who coaxed the fly into their net!" was the reply.

"Then you know something about it?" exclaimed Mr. Trego.

"I ought to. Mr. Romaine was very foolish. Is this the way the house of Romaine & Trego does business?"

The man flushed and frowned.

"We'll not talk about that," he went on.

"I want to know what has become of my partner. I don't want the matter to gain publicity by being put into the hands of the police. If the money and Mr. Romaine can be restored, no questions will be asked. You understand?"

"See here! I don't do business that way!" cried Capital Ben, stepping back and looking at the man in amazement. "I never compromise with crime."

"Think of the standing of the house."

"Think of the villainy that has lured Ralph Romaine to Washington!" exclaimed Ben.

"Your partner has a friend here who wants to see him as badly as you do, and she wants to see the two villains punished, besides."

"Miss Worcester, eh?"

"Florence," answered Ben, with a boy's familiarity. "I guess I will run this game as I think best, Mr. Trego."

The man bit his lips under his glossy mustache.

"If I corner the pair there will be publicity," continued the boy. "The whole scheme will be brought to light and the world will know that Ralph Romaine foolishly came to Washington with fifty thousand dollars on his person to meet a stranger named Dubois; but who really was one of the adroitest rascals unhung. If I had not been caught in the B. & O. Depot the other night by this same scamp, Mr. Romaine would not have come to the capital; but it is too late now. I am in this case now for all it's worth."

"But you won't call in the police, will you?"

"Not till I need them, and I may not need them at all."

"I hope you will not. What will you take to work the case up without publicity; to recover the money, or what you can of it, and—"

"There! that will do, sir," and the hand of the boy sleuth fell upon Trego's arm. "Remember what I have already said: I work this case up the way it suits me. If I find the pair there will be a public trial. Mr. Romaine will not object to it from what I have heard of him."

The eyes of Trego seemed to flash.

"I sha'n't pay you a dollar!" he exclaimed.

"All right," laughed Ben. "Go back to Baltimore and take care of the bank. If Mr. Dubois wants another loan tell him you can't accommodate him; but he won't be likely to call, I'm thinking. Good-night, Mr. Trego."

"What! are you going to expose the whole affair?" exclaimed Romaine's partner, moving after the boy. "I tell you I don't want it done."

Capital Ben stopped and wheeled upon the man.

"What makes you so anxious to hush matters up?" he cried, as he drew his handsome figure to its true height and looked the Baltimorean in the eye. "They may do things in Baltimore to

your notion, Mr. Trego, but that's not the style here. I'll report when I see proper. Now, sir, you will let me play my hand out. Good-night."

The young detective turned his back on Trego, and deliberately walked off.

If he had looked over his shoulder he would have seen a very mad pair of eyes following him.

"Confound him! I didn't think he was that kind of a person," murmured the Baltimore banker. "Ain't there any way to head him off? If he should catch this Mr. Dubois I may have to go on the witness-stand, and I don't relish the prospect."

Capital Ben soon passed out of sight and did not pause until he stood in front of a brick house in a certain quarter of the city tolerably well known to him.

"I'm going to give the old place a thorough scouring," he said to himself. "Here is where I got a taste of Buck Bronson's infernal chair, and to this place I believe Ralph Romaine was decoyed."

The front door of the house, which seemed entirely unoccupied, was locked, and the boy transferred himself to the back yard with the intention of forcing an entrance from the rear.

The night was rather dark and the neighborhood was still, and the boy spotter found nothing to disturb his investigations.

He was only a short time in reaching the rear of the house, and a little work at the back door let him inside.

Once since his escape from it he had made a brief examination, but the present visit was to be thorough in hopes of obtaining a clew to the mystery that hung over the disappearance of Ralph Romaine.

The boy removed his shoes when he entered the house, and groped his way to a door which he found unlocked.

He was let into a room which appeared to be quite large, and utterly devoid of furniture.

"I expect to find all evidences of late occupation removed," murmured Ben. "I only want to find the trail where it naturally begins. If the Baltimore victim found the trap in this old house, I want to know it."

The big room yielded the young ferret nothing, and he exchanged it for another across a hallway.

All at once he found a desk in the darkness.

The discovery caused him to utter an exclamation of satisfaction.

A moment later he was examining the room with a match. He found an old-fashioned desk and a chair, but not the devilish one he had tried.

"They've got no use for the trap now," remarked the boy. "The pigeon-pluckers have flown, but what I want is to find the pigeon."

Room after room afforded no solution of the mystery, but the young sleuth did not despair.

"I'll go down to my prison," he cried, at last. "I think I can find it," and he soon found the trap-door leading into the cellar of the house.

When he was half-way down the steps Capital Ben heard a noise that brought him to a halt.

"It was more than rats," he murmured, and then he listened with all his might in the gloom that was intense.

Again the noise was heard; it was very like a human groan.

Capital Ben drew a match across the rafter overhead and thrust forward the cocked revolver he held in his hand.

As the little flame shot up the darkness was relieved and he saw a sight that took him forward with a bound.

"My God! is it you, Tad Trimble?" cried Ben, bending over the body of a boy lying on the ground.

"It's all that's left o' Tad," was the rejoinder in a feeble voice. "I thought they finished you, Ben?"

"Not yet!" laughed the young sleuth. "How came you here?"

Tad Trimble the bootblack proceeded to narrate his adventures which are already known to the reader.

"Ben, there is a man somewhere beyond that wall," the bootblack suddenly said, his hand designating a certain wall as he spoke.

The words thrilled the city sleuth.

"I've heard him off and on ever since I came to my senses in this place," continued Tad.

Capital Ben sprang up and went to the wall to which he applied his ear.

He heard nothing.

The wall itself was apparently solid. If there was a cellar beyond it must be reached from another part of the house.

"Can I leave you for a moment, Tad?" asked Ben.

"Yes; find the man beyond the wall!" was the reply. "He may be a victim like myself."

Capital Ben went up the steps and disappeared.

In a minute he was sounding the floor of a certain room in the old house.

At last the rigid search yielded a trap door, and without fear the young ferret dropped into an unknown place.

The next moment another match was called into service, and its light illumined the place.

The cellar was empty!

Capital Ben searched every corner.

"Am I too late?" he cried.

All at once his hand struck something sharp projecting beyond the stones in the wall. He leaned forward, clutched it and drew it out.

It was a business card and on the back of it was a scrawl, as if written in the dark:

"I am Ralph Romaine of Baltimore. Will nobody avenge me?" read the scrawl.

"I will!" exclaimed Capital Ben.

CHAPTER IX.

BUCK BRONSON'S PLAY.

A COMPLETE search of the underground retreat yielded nothing but the card with the scrawl on the back.

Capital Ben returned to Tad Trimble, who anxiously awaited him.

"Ralph Romaine has been in this house, but he is not here now," the young sleuth remarked.

"I have not heard him for some time," was the reply.

"The rascals have removed him—whether dead or alive, I do not know; but I will find out."

"How?"

"Leave that to me. The Baltimorean's experience in the chair did not kill him. I have evidence to this effect on the card I found in the cellar. I am now going to have you taken to the city hospital, Tad. The stick thrown at you from the upper window of this house has given you a severe hurt. We will practice a little deception about your wound for the present. Remember you were hit by some person strange to you, and squares from this house. You will be Dick Daggett at the hospital, and not Tad Trimble."

The bootblack looked at Ben in an amazed manner.

"Do you think Buck Bronson and his pard will come back?" he asked.

"After a while they surely will, if they think none of their work has been discovered. We will risk it at any rate."

The injured boy listened to the boy detective's plans and quietly acquiesced, and not long afterward Tad was helped into a cab at a point several squares from the trap, and Capital Ben ordered the driver to a well-known city hospital.

"I believe I have something worth reporting to Florence," murmured Ben, as he came back in the cab alone. "The girl has a stout heart in her, and can listen calmly to what I've got to retail. The mystery looks very dark about Ralph Romaine, but we'll clear it up by and by."

In the mean time Florence Worcester had gone back home from her trip to the building, occupied by Jerry Jasper, the rascally claims lawyer when he was at home.

The young girl was much disappointed at not finding the man she wanted to see, and she went home in no enviable frame of mind.

She had not formed a very happy opinion of Mr. Trego, the partner of Ralph Romaine. His desire to suppress all publicity about the crime that had been committed for "the honor of the house," as he termed it, made the young girl indignant, and if Mr. Trego had awaited her arrival, he would have heard some decisive language.

Florence reached home without accident and had hardly finished the narration of her adventures to her mother up-stairs when the tinkle of the bell started her.

The girl hastened down-stairs to answer the summons herself.

The next moment she started back with an ejaculation of amazement which she found it impossible to suppress.

Buck Bronson stood before her!

If some departed friend had risen from the dead Florence would not have been more surprised.

"Aha! good-night, Florence," smiled the oily rascal as he glided into the room. "A rather late call, I must confess, but 'better late than never,' ha, ha!"

Florence gave the man a sharp look and seemed about to dismiss him from the house, but his mien told her, as it were, that he would not depart until he was quite ready to go.

Instinctively the young girl led the way to the parlor and turned on the gas.

She hated the very ground this man walked on. She felt assured that he had to do with Ralph Romaine's disappearance, and she hated him all the more for this.

Upon one thing she was resolved, and that was that the interview should be brief.

"I am here on delicate business," continued Buck. "You recollect, Florence, that I did not get your answer at our last meeting. I am here for it now. Will you become my wife?"

The suddenness of the question drove all color from the young girl's cheeks, but only for a moment.

"Couldn't you postpone this interview?" she asked, flushing as suddenly as she had paled.

"No. It can't be postponed another hour."

He took a step toward Florence who seemed to shrink away with a quiver.

"I want a fair answer—no half-way work," he went on. "You know what I know about your father. You know I can blight your family name with a word. You know that your father was a—"

"For heaven's sake stop!" cried the young girl. "Don't utter the word you have on your lips. Let me think that my father was not the man you say he was."

"Then, say you will become my wife," was the answer. "What can you have against me anyhow, Florence? I'm as handsome as the average man, and I can hoe my row wherever I am placed. Because I have gambled a little—is that it?"

"No, no!" cried the girl. "I don't love you, Buck Bronson. I never—never can!"

"Ho! ho! Is that all?" laughed the villain. "You will think better of me by and by. I don't want to blight your life, Florence. I'm averse to showing your father's affairs up as I can. You can prevent it all, and by becoming my wife."

The look of the girl was fast becoming a stony glare.

"Come, come! no fainting," he exclaimed suddenly clutching her arm. "I sha'n't leave this house without your reply. I came here for it, and I'll have nothing else!"

The girl broke from his grasp.

"Then you shall have it!" she cried. "I am going to face the worst you can do, Buck Bronson. I will never become your wife!"

The answer seemed to stun the rascal for a minute.

"You don't mean that, Florence," he exclaimed.

"Every word of it."

"Think of the family name."

"I do."

"Think of your mother who will be disgraced by the blow I can deal."

"I think of her."

Florence Worcester faced the rascal and spoke through her teeth.

All at once Buck threw himself into an arm-chair, and placing his thumbs in the armholes of his elegant vest, looked derisively at the girl.

"I'd like to know what put you in this frame of mind," he went on. "The other night you would have yielded if that street spy had not come upon the scene."

"Then is not now," was the quick response. "I think I have told you plainly enough, Buck Bronson, that I will not marry you."

"You didn't speak in riddles, that's a fact," replied Buck, smiling faintly. "Very well. Your refusal is a challenge for me to do my worst."

"You can do it if you like."

"By Jupiter! I will do nothing less!" cried the rascal. "Before to-morrow night Washington society shall know that the daughter of the late Cheney Worcester had a thief for a father!"

The malignance with which the last sentence was uttered, almost staggered the young girl.

"I've got proofs for it, too," he went on, his eyes sparkling with rage. "I've got the papers that were not found in your father's desk when he died."

"If you have them, who is the thief?" cried Florence. "We always suspected you of having access to father's office, and by your own confession you brand yourself dishonest. Go and deal the blow. We will prepare for it the best we can."

Buck Bronson sprung from the chair amazed at the coolness of the fair creature before him.

This was the girl whom he expected to make

his wife as a part of the infamous double game he was playing.

Not content with the plot against Ralph Romaine the Baltimore banker, he was striking for still higher stakes, and for a wife who was one of the most beautiful women in Washington.

"You can't prepare for this stroke of mine," he said to the young girl. "You had better reconsider your resolution. It is not quite too late yet."

"Never! a thousand threats like the kind you have held over my head would not make me rescind."

"Foolish to the last," he laughed with derision as he moved toward the door. "I'll make you feel the hand of Buck Bronson before the sun sets to-morrow. You think I won't, but wait and see. I've played cool hands in my time—"

"And an infamous one the other night, if the truth could be got at!" interrupted Florence looking him in the eye.

She saw the city villain start under his well-kept demeanor.

"That arrow went home," she murmured.

"Buck Bronson knows what became of Ralph Romaine. What would I not give if Capital Ben were here to follow this man from my house?"

"You think you hit a mark that time," smiled the Excelsior Sport, recovering in an instant. "How are you going to meet my blow? I'd like to know."

"Deal it and see," cried the girl with an air of mystery.

"Another challenge, eh? All right! Let me bid you good-night, Florence. When the blow falls you need not come to Buck Bronson with a reversal of your answer. It will be too late!"

She made no reply, and he walked from the parlor across the hall and into the street.

"Merciful Heaven! what have I done?" welled from the young girl's heart when she heard the door close. "He will do it. He will brand my father a felon; but I could not become his wife!"

There was no one nigh to catch the figure that sunk unconscious to the floor, but on the street outside there was some one to throw himself upon Buck Bronson's trail as he left the house.

And that somebody was a boy with keen eyes and a stealthy, noiseless step.

It was Capital Ben, the young ferret of Washington!

CHAPTER X.

ON THE ALERT.

"JUPITER! I did not think the girl would show that much spirit," ejaculated Buck Bronson when he found himself on the street again, and totally unaware that Capital Ben was at his heels. "I don't know about making the play I threatened, but something's got to be done. The other play is still unknown, and the papers have thrown out no hints, as Jerry feared they would. We've got the fifty thousand safe enough, but I want to finger the girl's fortune. The only way to do that is to marry her, but that chance seems to have gone glimmering."

When the Excelsior Sport turned the first corner from Florence Worcester's house, he no longer looked like himself in the face.

He had hastily adjusted a full beard which completely altered his appearance, and with this on he kept his way toward the Avenue still followed and watched by the boy.

If Buck had left Washington since his successful play against Ralph Romaine he had come back for a certain purpose.

He had not heard of Jerry Jasper's contest with Capital Ben in his office, and he (Buck) still believed that the potion he had added to the fever drops at Mrs. Seeley's had "fixed" the young spotter for good.

Therefore, Ben was the last person he expected to see on his trail at that hour.

The boy resolved not to lose sight of the sport, and the addition of the false whiskers did not throw him off his guard.

Buck strolled down to Pennsylvania Avenue as if he was in no hurry, and the boy keeping him in sight, saw him look searchingly at the people as if he were seeking some particular person.

"Mebbe he's looking for Jerry," muttered Ben, and the next moment he saw Buck nod to a man who stopped and went back toward him.

"Just as I expected!" cried the city sleuth. "That is Jerry Jasper for the world. Don't look like himself, but it's him all the same. Ha! there they go across the Avenue, toward the market!"

The two men had joined and were crossing the wide avenue toward a park or plot of trees on the south side and in front of the market.

In the center of the plot is a pond, the surface of which is dotted here and there with the broad leaves of a water lily, and across the water is thrown a footbridge, which enables people to pass back and forth.

The keen eyes of the boy saw the two men reach the bridge, and while he watched them they stopped and leaned against its side.

"Now for a confab," ejaculated the young sleuth. "They are going to say exactly what I want to hear. Can't I get to take it all in by a little work?"

It was torture for the boy to stand off and see the two conspirators talking confidentially on the bridge. Their figures were discernible, and as the bridge had no passengers at that hour, they were not disturbed.

For a few minutes Capital Ben worked his wits, and then he started up the Avenue and crossed above the plotters.

A minute later he was among the trees of the plot and his body was moving like a snake through the grass toward the bridge.

It was a hazardous crawl for the ferret of Washington; he knew that if either of the rascals discovered him his life would not be worth a bit of paper, but for all this, he covered foot after foot of ground, and gradually drew near the conspirators.

Fortunately for Ben the vicinity of the bridge was well shaded by trees and bushes, and the backs of the men seemed to be turned toward him.

He could hear nothing as he advanced, but his eyes constantly watched the talkers, and now and then they glowed with a look of triumph.

At last Capital Ben reached that end of the bridge nearest the Avenue, and under the dense shadow it threw he paused and caught his breath.

The conspirators were in the middle of the structure directly over the water. It would be a task to reach them.

"By Jericho! nothing shall baffle me now!" exclaimed the boy detective. "I came here to find out something, and I don't intend to go back without doing it."

A little while later he was moving toward the center of the bridge by means of the irons and timber underneath. It was a difficult feat, for a failure, a mis-catch, would precipitate him into the water and put him at the mercy of the two rascals.

Inch by inch and hand over hand the dauntless boy moved forward.

When he stopped at last he found himself directly under Buck and Jerry, and, what is more, he distinguished their low, earnest voices, much to his delight.

Capital Ben could hardly conceal the joy of his successful play, and with his face pressed against the timbers of the bridge he prepared to take advantage of his shrewdness.

"We can't make a second move till we've settled with the everlasting street weasel," he heard Buck Bronson say. "Why didn't you finish him in your office, Jerry? You admit that you had him on the floor, but yet you jump up and run away."

"Confound it! I expected to see a cop run in every second," replied the claims lawyer, in no good-humor at Buck's rebuke.

"The prisoner was safe when you left him?"

"Yes."

"He won't compromise, eh?"

"Who talks of that?" exclaimed the Excelsior Sport. "Do you think I'm fool enough to let the bird go till the last hand has been played?"

"Not that, Buck, but—"

"I failed at Florence's house to-night, but only for a time," was the interruption, in the Excelsior Sport's well-known tones.

"You don't intend to give her up, then?"

"Not by any means! There's a hundred thousand dollars where that girl is, and I'm not fool enough to let it go just because she said 'no' to-night. Do you want to withdraw from the game, Jerry?"

"I do not."

"All right; then we play it out together. I'm a man of many disguises. I can outwit this young spy who has given us so much trouble. The next time I'll see that he doesn't get through my fingers."

"I'll have a say in that little matter, Buck," chuckled the boy, who was clinging like a monkey to the iron under the bridge. "I've made a bonanza strike to-night, sure enough, and if I'm not match enough for you two, I'll throw myself from G. W.'s monument!"

"What's to be the next move?" asked the lawyer, after a minute of silence.

"I'm going to play my game for the girl and the ducats. The bird in the cage is safe."

"But the weasel is at large," suggested Jerry.

"Hang the weasel!" grated Buck. "I got the bird from the first cage to the new one by myself, and I think you could have taken care of the boy."

Jerry Jasper made no reply, and if Capital Ben had seen him at that moment he would have caught a frown on his face.

"See here!" suddenly cried Buck Bronson, "the next time you have a chance at Capital Ben you want to save on him. You can trust our Jehu, Dick Dodson. He is thought to be one of the squarest cabbies in Washington, but he's safe for us. I happen to know that he served a term at Sing Sing, and rather than have that exposed, he'd go through fire and water for us."

"Oh! so that's the string you pull on Dick, eh?" laughed the lawyer.

"That's only one of several I've got," was the reply. "When that one works like a charm, what's the use of pulling any other? He's played fair with us so far, Jerry, and he'll continue to the end. Hello! what was that?"

This sudden question was occasioned by a slight movement of one of the young sleuth's limbs, which dislodged an old wasps'-nest, causing it to fall into the water with a splash.

Capital Ben held his breath.

He caught a glimpse of a man leaning over the railing of the bridge, with a pair of glittering eyes on the alert.

"It was a water-rat," remarked Jerry.

"Mebbe it was, but I don't like rats of any kind," was the reply. "I don't see anything, that's a fact; but, hang it all! where did the rat go to, anyhow?"

Capital Ben involuntarily drew back.

He knew that an investigation would expose him to the two villains, and probably put a sudden ending to his career.

He had cause for alarm.

"Let's get away from here," Jerry Jasper said. "It's no place to talk, anyhow."

"Too many water-rats, eh, Jerry?" laughed Buck.

"Not that, but, by Jupiter! this is Washington, and we're wanted, you know."

"Do you feel the halter draw, old boy?" and the Excelsior Sport laughed again.

The claims lawyer muttered a reply which the breathless boy under the bridge did not catch, and then the two men moved toward the Avenue.

"Well, I should say it paid me!" chuckled Capital Ben, as he listened to the sound of footsteps. "I will proceed to pull the same string that has helped your game along, Buck Bronson. I happen to know the man whom you call Dick Dodson, though that does not happen to be his real name. Every bone in my body aches, but I can put up with that for what I've heard."

The following minute Capital Ben was moving back toward the street, but he no longer exercised the caution he had indulged in a short time before.

When he reached the Avenue the conspirators had disappeared, and he did not attempt to find them.

Half an hour later, a man holding a pair of lines on the seat of a cab was accosted by a bright-eyed boy, whose feet were planted among the spokes of the front wheel.

"Hello, Dick! I want to be driven to the man who is in Buck Bronson's new cage!" the boy exclaimed.

The cabman recoiled with a strange cry.

"Oh, you needn't put on so much surprise!" continued the boy. "Do what I say, or Washington will hear of your experience in Sing Sing!"

CHAPTER XI.

NETTING A TARTAR.

THE boy detective could not repress a smile at the consternation his words had created in the hackman's mind.

The man looked like a person who suddenly hears his death sentence.

"I want to see the man you drove with Buck Bronson from the depot the other night," continued Capital Ben in the same stern tones he had used before. "You are not going to escape me, Dick Dodson. I am thoroughly acquainted with your history, and I will spread a little of it before Washington if you attempt to play any bluff games. Shall I get into the cab, or would you rather have me on the seat with you?"

A singular gleam appeared suddenly in Dick Dobson's eyes.

It did not escape the young sleuth's notice.

"If I must take you to where you want to go I prefer to have you inside," he replied.

"Would you really, Dick?" laughed Ben.

"Yes."

"I'll be accommodating," and the boy got down. "Now, you will take me straight to Ralph Romaine's pleasant quarters, or there will be an unpleasant occurrence in which you may figure as the central character."

Capital Ben opened the door of the cab as he finished, and with a last admonishing look at Dick Dodson, got inside.

"This fellow is shrewd and without scruples," muttered the city ferret. "I must watch him from here, for a seat with him might expose me to the sharp eyes of Buck Bronson or Jerry Jasper."

The cab rolled away with Ben on the seat inside, but with eyes on the alert.

Dick Dodson whipped the horses into a good gait and the vehicle passed up the Avenue, turned into the White House grounds and came out beyond them headed for Georgetown.

Capital Ben kept his seat and noted his surroundings, but said nothing.

On, on went the cab.

Georgetown was reached, but Dick Dodson kept on.

"Am I going to the world's end?" cried the boy spotter, and then he thought of halting the furious driver, but held his peace.

The vehicle did not slow up until the aqueduct bridge, leading across the Potomac, was reached.

Beyond the river lay Rosslynn and Arlington.

Dick Dodson drew up at the toll-house on the bridge, and fumbled in his pockets for toll money which he found after a search; then the cab moved on again.

It was dark on the bridge, but far to the left Capital Ben could see the thousand lights of Washington, and the electric flash of the dome of the Capitol.

"This tool of Buck Bronson's is playing a game!" exclaimed Ben. "If he thinks he is going to take me into the wood beyond Rosslynn, he will find himself mistaken. I have given him all the string he will get. Now I will show my hand."

The next moment the boy sleuth opened the door of the cab and hailed the man on the seat.

"Pull up!" he cried.

Dick Dodson kept on as if he had not heard the command.

"Pull up there, I say," repeated Ben in a louder tone.

"Well, what is it?" asked Dick in a surly tone as he leaned toward the boy, while he did not stop his team.

"Where is this man?"

"A little further on."

"In Rosslynn?"

"A little beyond. You don't suppose Buck would give him a public residence, eh?"

"Maybe not."

"I don't think he would, and neither do you."

Capital Ben made no reply for a moment, but he did not shut the door.

Beneath the bridge flowed the Potomac, with here and there the glimmering light of a passing boat. The water seemed hundreds of feet below, yet it was not far, as the young detective knew.

If he was to be taken beyond Rosslynn, upon the somewhat lonely road that winds wearily to Arlington, he would be in great peril. The look given him by the ex-convict driver in Washington had told him that a desperate man was in his employ, and that he would have to use eyes and ears to advantage.

He noticed that after his conversation with Dick on the bridge the cab moved slower.

At last it came to a halt.

It was the darkest part of the old structure, and Capital Ben felt that something was about to happen.

"What's up?" he called to Dick.

"Harness broke," was the answer, as the cabman swung himself from his perch.

"That is a lie!" cried the boy. "Get back upon your seat, Dick Dodson, or I'll let all your history out."

The man looked furious. He stood within three feet of the open carriage-door, and saw the figure of his young passenger braced on the step.

"The Baltimorean is not over here, and you know it!" Capital Ben went on. "I have given you all the string you are to get. I wanted to see what you would do. Now, turn back and

show me Ralph Romaine, or suffer the consequences of failure."

The burly cabman came suddenly toward the boy detective, and his face almost touched him as he leaned forward and exclaimed.

"I'll show you who masters me, you young city weasel!"

The next second he came at Ben with all his force, blazing eyes and eager hands, and before the young detective could thrust a weapon into his face, he was clutched savagely and forced back into the cab!

"Did you think I would show you the man you want to find?" hissed Dick. "Fool you are if you did! Yes, I've been in Sing Sing, but you'll never get to tell it in Washington! And the boy felt a pair of demon hands at his throat."

Capital Ben struggled with all his might. He knew it was a combat of life and death, and that he was pitted against a man who would show no mercy.

His agility stood him well in hand now, and he suddenly showed Dick Dodson that he had not been misnamed the Washington Weasel.

All of a sudden he twisted from the cabman's hands, and heard his success greeted by a mad oath.

"Not yet, my boy!" cried Dick springing again to the combat. "There is too much at stake to let you slip through my hands—entirely too much."

Capital Ben found that despite his success the struggle was by no means ended.

Did he think it was?

Dick Dodson came back to the fight with renewed resolution.

Shutting his teeth hard he dashed at the slippery boy, caught him savagely and forced him into one corner of the cab.

"I'm going to drop you into the river!" Capital Ben had hissed in his ears. "Confound your prying nature, you deserve no better fate than this! The next man you shadow will be a spirit in another world."

"Merciful God! this man is going to master me!" passed through Ben's mind as he found himself yielding unwillingly to the superior strength of the ex-convict. "If I fall from this bridge into the Potomac, my hunt for Ralph Romaine will end here."

He felt the breath of Dick Dodson on his cheek; the strong hands of the driver were lifting him from the cab.

At that moment the boy's fingers touched the revolver which had been knocked from his grasp at the first onset.

A thrill passed over his frame at the touch, and he took new hope.

"Aha! you've found the dropper, have you?" suddenly exclaimed Dick.

"Yes and for you!" cried the boy.

A moment later he raised the weapon and touched the trigger.

The interior of the cab was filled with the stunning report.

Capital Ben felt the hands of the convict driver suddenly loosen, and at the same moment the horses started madly away!

Thrown back by the abrupt start, Capital Ben lost his footing, and when he came to his senses again the team had left the bridge and was dashing like mad through Rosslyn!

A sudden impulse took the young detective to the door but a look showed him that it would be folly to leap out with the cab going at that terrific rate!

"If I had the lines!" cried Ben, and then he continued through clinched teeth: "I'll get possession of them or lose the whole game!"

Rosslyn with its few little frame houses was passed in a minute, and the horses were dashing toward Arlington. The boy spotter got out upon the step of the swaying cab, and caught at the iron about the driver's seat.

It was worth his life to miss the iron, but his fingers closed about it, and the next moment he had swung himself forward, and was grasping a pair of lines on which his life depended!

Braced in Dick Dodson's seat Capital Ben proceeded to the task before him.

The two strong horses seemed to get new strength and fright with each revolution of the wheels.

The boy clutched the lines and tried to check them, but it seemed in vain.

He threw himself back on the seat with the leather lines wrapped about his hands and worked with all his strength. His hat was gone, and the night wind that came down the lonely road tossed his hair in every direction.

All at once the front wheel struck a bowlder, and the flying cab careened. Capital Ben could not keep back a sharp cry of terror; he was

lifted from the seat and then flung back upon it as if from the hand of a giant.

The next second the wheel struck another rock.

"Heavens! we are getting off the road!" cried the boy.

With wonderful presence of mind he tried to bring the mad team back into the road. The effort almost took his strength.

"Don't these horses never let up?" cried Ben. "By Jupiter! Dick Dodson will have to get out a search-warrant for his property if we keep on!"

The wild team kept on till the city ferret saw a fringe of trees on either hand.

"I'll run 'em into the woods and risk it!" he exclaimed.

He did not get to perform this feat, for that second the cab struck an obstruction and pitched to one side.

This time it did not right itself as before, and Capital Ben, clinging to the seat and the lines, was dragged on at a speed that threatened speedy death.

CHAPTER XII.

A BOLD TRICK.

Two hours after the tussle on the bridge between Capital Ben and the convict cabman, Buck Bronson, about to enter a well-known hotel in Washington, felt a hand on his arm.

There was something in the touch that startled him.

As he turned, which he quickly did, he stood face to face with Dick Dodson.

"Captain, the devil's to pay!" were the driver's first words.

"For what kind of goods?" laughed the excelsior sport.

"My cab's a wreck and one horse is nearly dead, and all on account of that street weasel called Capital Ben!"

Buck Bronson uttered a cry.

"Come up-stairs. I've got a room in this house!" he exclaimed. "I want the whole story. The boy again, eh? By George! I've got to shake him off."

Dick Dodson followed the sport to a room on the third floor of the hotel, and was waved to a chair and told to spin his story.

He began at the beginning, told how he was suddenly accosted by the young detective, and ordered to drive to the hiding-place of the missing Baltimorean, how he took the boy through the President's grounds, and on to Georgetown, till the aqueduct bridge was reached.

Then came an account of the struggle in the cab, told in the cool vein of a practiced criminal, and listened to with almost breathless interest by the excelsior sport.

"I wasn't looking for the shot he fired in the cab," continued Dick. "The bullet, fired at random, tore the skin over my temple and threw me back upon the bridge. It sent the horses off, too, sent them at breakneck toward Rosslyn."

"With the boy?"

"With the Washington Weasel!"

"You followed, of course?"

"As soon as I got able. When I got up I could hear the cab rattling up the road far beyond Rosslyn, and I knew at once that something would be ruined. I started after the run-aways on foot. The people of Rosslyn told me that the horses went through the place like a bolt of lightning."

"Get to the end of the story!" cried Buck impatiently. "I don't want to follow you step by step. You found the turn-out?"

"Yes!" spoke Dick through set teeth. "I found all there was left of it—in a ditch at the top of the hill."

"In bad condition?"

"The cab was splinters—looked like it had been dragged some distance over the road. I've got to get a new rig, sir."

"We'll see to that, Dick. What had become of the boy?"

"Heaven knows."

"You got no trace of him?"

"None, only a hat which I picked up just before I struck the cab. There was blood on the lines where a person would be likely to take hold of them. I found the horses in the woods half a mile further on. I've got to have one new horse, too."

"You shall have it! I think you did your duty as far as you could, Dick."

"By Jupiter! but for the pistol I would have had the young weasel in the Potomac! That's what I took him over there for. I wonder if he thought I would take him to the right place?"

Buck Bronson laughed, but suddenly became serious.

"Did you make any search for the boy?" he asked.

"It was no use. He wasn't on the road, nor under the cab; and the wood was too dark for business. I was anxious to get back to Washington to see and to post you, captain. If the boy is able to be around after that racket, he's dangerous. I don't want him about with what he knows about my residence in Sing Sing," and Dick lowered his voice when he got to the last sentence. "How do you think he got onto that, captain?"

The Excelsior Sport shook his head.

"I shall be on the lookout for him from now on," the convict cabman went on. "I guess I don't want him around any more than you do, Captain Buck. If he escaped without a scratch, he must be a pard of Old Nick's. He didn't stop the horses; I could see that. They upset the cab, dragged it over the road a piece, and then kicked loose."

"Maybe he got out before the catastrophe occurred," suggested the sport.

"It must have been that way," was the response. "What if the young fox is crippled somewhere in the woods beyond Rosslyn?"

"Or dead!"

"Yes, or dead!" cried Dick. "I'd nearly give my other horse if he was in that fix over there! If I had got him into the Potomac, there would be no more trailing by that ferret!"

Buck Bronson drew his watch and looked at it.

"Can you get a new team, Dick?"

"Yes."

"To-night?"

"Right away. I know where my credit is good for a turn-out."

"Get a buggy at once and meet me at Eighth and the Avenue. We'll see what became of the shadow."

Dick Dodson's eyes instantly dilated.

"Are we going over the route?" he asked.

"We are going to get at the bottom of this mystery. Get out the rig at once. I'll meet you at the place named."

The next minute Buck Bronson was alone.

"The chances favor the boy; I'll bet my head on it!" he ejaculated. "I can't play the double game out while he lives to shadow me. Dick Dodson nearly relieved me of his rascally espionage to-night. He did better than chicken-hearted Jerry Jasper who let the boy go when he had him in his clutches. The weasel to-night, Florence again to-morrow."

The Excelsior Sport walked from the room and went below. The full false beard he wore quite altered his appearance, and nobody in the office recognized him as Buck Bronson one of the best known characters in Washington.

He knew it would require some minutes for Dick to be at the appointed rendezvous with the rig, so he lit a cigar and picked up an evening paper which lay on the desk.

Glancing half carelessly over the last page his eye alighted on a name that instantly commanded attention.

"Hello! what's this?" he cried, and then he read the following paragraph which deeply interested him:

"TAD TRIMBLE AT THE HOSPITAL."

"It turns out that the boy, Dick Daggett, who was received at the Children's Hospital yesterday is Tad Trimble, the well-known bootblack and newsboy. He is suffering from a severe wound on the head and is delirious at times. In one of his quieter moments, when told that his hurt might prove fatal, he gave his true name and says he was assaulted by a well-known sporting character of the city whose name he has not yet divulged. The boy is suffering greatly and is conscious only at times. The surgeon in charge hopes to get a full confession from the boy, during his next lucid period, when the person who made the assault will be arrested."

Buck Bronson read breathless to the end of the paragraph which was skipped by hundreds, and not seen at all by many more.

"I don't want things to take a turn like this!" he cried, throwing the paper down. "I thought the boy had no chance to get out of the cellar, but here he is at the hospital, and on the eve of giving me away. Jerry would light out lively if he saw this."

The Excelsior Sport left the hotel in no pleasant mood. He seemed to be between two dangerous fires—between Capital Ben's shrewdness and Tad Trimble's confession.

He reached the street with his brain in a confused whirl.

"If I could be two minutes alone with the boy at the hospital he wouldn't give anybody away!" he hissed. "But they wouldn't let me see him if I went there. No! I've got to at-

tend to the other one. Capital Ben is the danger I've got to look after now."

He walked up the street, to the place where he was to meet Dick Dodson with the rig. Though he kept his eyes on the alert, he could not see that anybody was watching him.

The convict driver was not yet on hand, and Buck leaned against an adjacent tree and began to wait.

Five minutes passed away, and then Dick drove up, looking anxiously for him.

"Great Caesar, captain, we needn't go," exclaimed the ex-convict, leaning toward the Excelsior Sport, as he came forward.

"Why not?"

"The boy's in the city."

Buck Bronson gave utterance to a startling exclamation.

"Alive in Washington?" he cried.

"He's nowhere else."

"When did you see him?"

"Not two minutes ago."

"Where?"

"He's down the walk a little ways, with his eyes on us now for a thousand!"

The Excelsior Sport turned with a half-smothered oath.

"Turn about and drive slowly toward him," he whispered to Dodson. "Be prepared for anything. Keep close to the sidewalk, and if I throw the boy into the buggy, clutch him with one hand and drive off like fury. I'm playing for both of us now, as much for you as for me."

The lips of the convict cabman met firmly and his eyes flashed.

"You can trust me, captain!" he cried. "The boy was at the second tree down."

"I'll find him."

Buck Bronson turned back as Dick began to bring the horse about.

"Now, my living shadow, I'll show you a trick which you do not think is in the game!" he chuckled. "You got out of the smash-up safely, but the cyclone now on hand will destroy you. Wait and see!"

A glance told the Excelsior Sport that the cabman was obeying his injunction by keeping close to the sidewalk, and with itching hands and eager eyes he went forward to play his trick.

"The second tree, Dick says," muttered Buck.

"Ah! I've got my peepers on the ferret already. Now, I'll show you my play, Capital Ben."

A boy was leaning carelessly against the tree and not watching the man, who came up with the tread of a cat.

All at once Buck sprang forward and caught the boy in his hands. At the same moment Dick Dodson drew up at the tree.

"See here, mister, I'm no rat!" cried the boy, struggling in the villain's grasp.

Buck Bronson made no reply, but lifting his victim from the ground, he took a step toward the street and forced him into the buggy.

"Now, Dick, do your duty!" he cried, and the next moment the buggy was flying down the Avenue.

CHAPTER XIII.

FACE TO FACE.

"THAT'S what I call decidedly slick!" laughed Buck Bronson in undertones, as he walked from the scene of his exploit. "Dick knows where to drive to, and I think I have seen the last of the weasel's shadow game. Nobody appeared to see my play; the fates were in my favor, and I guess there's only one more trick to take—the hundred thousand up on Fourteenth street!"

The Excelsior Sport was confident that his bold play had rid him effectually of Capital Ben.

Already the buggy carrying Dick Dodson and the boy had vanished, and Buck had nothing to occupy his mind for the time.

After a short stroll, he stopped suddenly and turned back.

"I believe I'll see how my bird is getting along," he ejaculated. "We've got to bring matters to a crisis soon. I'll see if his mood has changed since I saw him last."

Forthwith Mr. Buck Bronson quickened his gait, and after a long walk he drew up in front of a large old looking and secluded house in the suburbs of Washington.

The front of the house was almost entirely hidden by dense untrimmed shrubbery, and could not be seen from the rickety gate. It was one of those houses for sale of which Jerry Jasper was agent, and from outward appearances a better place to keep a prisoner could not be imagined.

Buck Bronson passed up the unkempt walk and disappeared among the shrubbery at one corner of the house.

In a little while he reappeared at a rear door which he opened with a key which he took from under a decaying wooden step, and entered the old house.

The place was furnished inside, but the furniture looked old, as it really was.

Buck Bronson found a stair at the foot of which he stopped and removed his shoes. Then he stole up the steps and stopped at a door near the head of the landing.

Drawing a revolver, the Excelsior Sport inserted a key into a lock, turned it without noise and opened the door.

The next moment he shut the door behind him, transferred the key to his pocket, and was recognized by a man who sprang up from a couch and started toward him.

Buck Bronson's eyes flashed when he saw the man in the light of the lamp on a small table near by, and he made a menacing gesture with the revolver that kept the prisoner of the room at bay.

"You are here yet, I see," the sport cried with a smile. "How do you like your quarters?"

The man who was young and handsome, though his features showed traces of suffering, seemed about to resent the inquiry with an outburst of anger, but Buck saw him check the desire.

"You know how I like it here," he exclaimed.

"When is this to end?"

"When I have played my game clear out," was the reply.

"Didn't the game end when you got the money I brought from Baltimore?"

"No."

"By a piece of shrewd villainy that has no parallel, you got fifty thousand dollars from us."

"You may call the trick what you please, Mr. Romaine. It was successful all the same," laughed Buck.

"Yes," replied the sport's prisoner biting his lip. "I am a fool for once, at least."

"This room was once the abode of another man whose money got him into a net," cried Buck. "Those bars at the windows were not put there for you, as you may have thought. The owners of this property kept a man in this room for ten years, or until the undertaker came and took him away. You are as one dead to the world, Ralph Romaine. Already you are entirely forgotten. Your partner, Trego, came here, looked around a little, made an inquiry or two, and went home to tell your friends that you are off on a business trip of indefinite length. The police never heard of you, the papers know nothing—so you see you are dead to the world."

"You are a deeper villain than I thought!" exclaimed the prisoner. "What is your price, Buck Bronson, or Dubois, as I once thought you?"

"My price? I haven't any!" cried the sport.

"But you don't intend that I shall always remain here?"

"Why not? Do you think I am going to imperil the success of my last play by letting you out? Nobody ever comes to this house, save those whom I send here. The person who drops your food over the little transom is a mute whom I picked up years ago. The loudest cries you might make at the window would meet with no response. This old house has been in the market for years, but nobody wants it because of the crime which is supposed to have been committed on the man I have mentioned—the prisoner of this room."

Ralph Romaine seemed to draw back as he gave the sport a searching look.

"You must have a price," he cried. "All men have. You dare not name the conditions under which I can leave this place."

"Of course not, for I have none to name," was the answer. "I will call occasionally to see that you are still here, though my silent man will not let you suffer."

The prisoner took a step forward, and Buck saw that his hands were clinched.

"You don't want to push matters!" the sport cried, menacingly. "The game I have in hand is going to be won at all hazards. It is but half-played though. I took a very important trick a while ago, and if you get obstreperous, Ralph Romaine, by Jupiter! I will proceed to very harsh measures!"

"Which means that you will not hesitate to take human life?"

"I will not hesitate," was the coolly spoken response. "I am going to be plain with you. My game is for big money and a good deal more. The fifty thousand which you brought to Washington to loan to Dan Dubois, alias Buck Bronson, is only a drop in the bucket. You've

got a hundred thousand in Baltimore, but there is a like sum elsewhere with a very desirable object attached to it. Therefore, you haven't got money enough to purchase your release. Be patient, and the liberty you want may come sooner than you expect it."

A sudden start by the captive banker seemed to indicate a discovery.

"I think I begin to see through your game," he cried.

A smile curled the lips of the Excelsior Sport.

"Perhaps you do," he ejaculated. "I have wondered why you have not discovered it before."

"My belief gives a deeper dye to your infamous scheme!" flashed the Baltimorean. "You have designs against a young girl!"

"Ah! the beautiful Florence!" laughed Buck Bronson, in tones that flushed his prisoner's cheeks. "She is worth playing for, don't you think so?"

Ralph Romaine looked too indignant to speak.

"I'll inform you that I've got my net about the girl," the Washington sport went on. "There's a cool hundred thousand where she is."

"Take all I'm worth, and leave her alone!" cried Romaine. "She is too good to fall into your clutches!"

"But just good enough to become your wife, with her splendid dowry, eh?" was the reply, accompanied by a cutting laugh. "I can't afford to let my chances slip. To-morrow I play the last card on Fourteenth street. It will win the game."

"What is it?"

"The threatened exposure of her father's felony!"

The captive banker uttered a cry.

"Ah! did you never hear a whisper of it?" continued Bronson. "Judge Worcester, as administrator, used other people's money to enrich himself. He made himself a felon to get up in the world. I have the proofs in black and white. Don't you see that an exposure would throw Florence and her mother into social disgrace? I've got the hand that wins, haven't I?"

"Spare them this shame!" cried Romaine.

"I am going to, on one condition—that Florence immediately becomes Mrs. Bronson!"

Ralph Romaine recoiled.

"She has already refused to do this, but when I confront the pair with the papers they'll give in, and I'll take the trick. I had a weasel at my heels for a while, but he is out of the way now, and there is nothing to hinder my success."

"Go ahead!" cried Romaine with flashing eyes. "There will be a turning point one of these days, Buck Bronson, and then, by the eternal God! we will see how justice is administered in this country."

"Justice!" echoed the Excelsior Sport with a derisive laugh. "That is played out in America. The shrewdest man wins and holds the stakes. You will see, Romaine, that I have won so far. To-morrow I play the big game out."

He walked backward to the door, inserted the key deftly into the lock and covered his prisoner with the cocked six-shooter.

Ralph Romaine stood in the center of the room like a man ready to leap at an enemy, and it was evident that the revolver in the hand of the desperate sport was all that held him back.

All at once Buck threw the door open, and sprung across the threshold. The next moment the door closed with a bang and a key clicked in the lock.

"Safe yet!" cried the sport as he went out. "I've got to get rid of that man before long. He's a white elephant on my hands."

The villain left the house and went down the furzy walk in front.

At the gate a man sprang into the path and forced Buck to recoil with his hand on his revolver.

"I thought you'd be here!" cried the man.

"Ah! is it you, Dick?" was the reply.

"Where is the young weasel I caught on the sidewalk?"

"Hang me, if I know, captain. The boy you threw into the buggy wasn't Capital Ben at all."

Buck uttered a startling cry.

CHAPTER XIV.

QUICK WORK.

At that moment, concealed by the shrubbery and not twenty feet from the two men, stood a well-built boy with a pleased smile at the corners of his mouth and glittering eyes.

"Of course you tossed the wrong boy into the bug-y, Buck Bronson," muttered the young spy. "And it is fortunate for me that you did so. By dogging your footsteps after that exploit, I think I've found the Baltimore oriole's cage, and I'll make the most of it, too!"

The surprise of the Excelsior Sport when told by his tool the convict cabman that he had caught the wrong boy was complete.

He had seized the youth on the sidewalk without so much as giving him a second look. As he was about Capital Ben's size, and stood at the tree designated by Dick, he took it for granted that he was the Washington Weasel, and acted accordingly.

Dick Dodson soon discovered the mistake, and some distance up the Avenue he drew rein and pitched the unknown boy unceremoniously into the street.

The cabman's next move was to find Buck Bronson, but that worthy had vanished, and after a futile search of several of his city haunts Dick had come to the old house there to find the sport as we have seen.

The boy in the shrubbery saw the two men move toward the city proper, and when they were lost to view he turned toward the house.

Capital Ben, for the youth was the agile detective, was convinced that the mansion contained the man he desired to find, but its silent and deserted look seemed to overthrow his convictions.

Not a noise came from within, and Ben looked like a ghost as he moved about among the rank shrubbery, or listened in various places.

Against one side of the house grew a heavy vine that appeared strong enough to bear a man's weight, and seeing that one of the upper windows could be reached by it, the young spotter began to ascend along the wall.

He reached the window and went to work on the sash, working cautiously, but with all his might.

After awhile the window yielded and Capital Ben crossed the sill, and dropped into a room about which he knew nothing.

For a while he tried to examine the place in the dark, but did not succeed to his satisfaction, then he struck a silent match to discover that he was in a large apartment, well furnished with furniture thickly coated with dust.

The boy detective soon left this room and got into a corridor that led to a stairway.

His match was out and he was in darkness again.

He felt his way along the hall to a door. He turned the knob and pushed inward, but the portal did not yield.

"Nothing here," he cried, turning away.

At that moment the sound of a quick footstep struck his ears.

"What was that?"

He went back to the door and listened.

"By Jericho! there's a man beyond this door!" parted his lips. "He is listening just as I am. I can hear him breathing beyond the door."

Drawing back a step Capital Ben leaped at the transom and caught the top of the door frame firmly.

"Who's in here?" he called, in a loud whisper.

A cry of surprise was the reply.

"I am here," spoke a voice beyond the door—the voice of a man.

"Are you friend or foe?"

"If you are Ralph Romaine, of Baltimore, I am a friend."

"I am he."

Capital Ben could not keep back a cry of exaltation.

"Found at last!" he cried. "Now, Buck Bronson, I will give you more trouble than ever!"

Instead of dropping to the floor, he drew his body up, and began to work his way through the transom—a decidedly difficult job.

"I'm liable to stick here," laughed Ben, between his breaths, to the man who waited for him impatiently in the room below. "I seem to fit this transom to a T, but in spite of it I'll wriggle through."

It was twenty minutes' work for the boy spotter to force himself through the narrow transom, and when he dropped to the floor below he was caught by the man, who broke forth into exclamations of joy.

"I've made a good deal of noise getting here!" exclaimed Ben. "Who is in the house besides yourself?"

"A guard who is a mute."

"Ho! that accounts for it," cried the boy.

"Buck and his Sing Sing pard have gone back to the city, and we can get out at our leisure."

You can't get out by the transom, Mr. Romaine; we must try the door."

Capital Ben, who knew a good deal about door-locks, went to work on the one before him, but he soon discovered that he had undertaken a gigantic task.

The boy looked dispirited.

"I'll have to get the key!" he exclaimed. "Buck carried one off, no doubt, but the jailer has another."

"What! are you going to tempt fate by robbing the mute?" cried the Baltimorean. "He is as strong as a lion, and, for all I know, may not sleep in the house."

"You can get out only by the key," was the reply. "I'll skin through the transom again, and make the attempt."

There was no other alternative, for Ralph Romaine could not force his body through the narrow space above the door; therefore, he helped Capital Ben to the transom and saw him work his way out.

The young sleuth began to search the house for the sleeping quarters of the banker's mute guard. With the tread of a cat he went from room to room, but found no one.

"I guess we've got to force the door, if it rouses the dead," he murmured at last. "I'll take a bed-post from the bed I saw in one of the rooms, and with it I'll open the cage of the Baltimore bird."

With this resolution foremost in his mind, Capital Ben glided back to the room where he intended to begin operations.

As he crossed a hall, a puff of wind blew into his face.

He stopped instantly.

"A door is open!" he exclaimed. "It was shut when I was here awhile ago. Some person has come in or gone out—which?"

The question was a puzzle to the young detective, but after awhile he continued toward the room he intended to visit.

"Great Caesar! the man who opened the door came in!" he suddenly exclaimed, and the next moment he was looking at a man who was undressing before a mirror.

Capital Ben saw that the man stood unsteadily before the glass, and that, to use a trite saying, all his fingers were thumbs. In short, the man was intoxicated.

"A little too much Washington poison," laughed the spotter while he watched the man before the glass. "Great heavens! it is Jerry Jasper!"

At that moment the boy had obtained a good look at the man's face, and it was enough to tell him that it was the claims lawyer and Buck Bronson's pard.

Capital Ben stepped into the room on tiptoe; the man did not hear him.

"Why, hello, Jerry old boy!" he cried, grasping the lawyer's arm. "I'm almighty glad to see you here. Give us your hand!"

The sport's friend recoiled and stared at the boy who had come upon him like a ghost.

"Don't go back on me, Jerry!" continued Ben with a laugh. "I haven't seen you since we separated in your office. Going to bed, eh? No, no, my old pard. Let me trouble you to open the left-hand door up-stairs."

This demand, as well as the pistol in Capital Ben's right hand, seemed to sober the claim-agent.

"I unlock nothing!" he cried, fixing his flashing eyes upon the boy detective. "By George! if you don't get out of here, I'll grind you to powder!"

"Not so bad as that, Jerry!" and Capital Ben stepped back and suddenly covered the man with the revolver. "I am playing my game out, Jerry Jasper," he went on sternly. "I don't intend to parley with a scoundrel like you. You know who is in the room up-stairs; you were not too drunk to know that there was a bed here for you. You know where the key to Ralph Romaine's door is. You will get it at once and go straight to the lock, or Jerry Jasper will never more do business on F street."

There was something terribly resolute in the look and tones of the boy who faced the F street lawyer.

Jerry Jasper felt a shiver pass through his frame when he looked over the revolver into the glittering eyes behind it.

"Come, Jerry; move along!" cried Ben.

The man started off with compressed lips.

"I'll get even for this!" he said between set teeth.

"I sha'n't object if you do," was the reply.

The lawyer went straight to the door of the Baltimorean's prison, and touching an unseen spring in the wall found a concealed key.

The next moment he inserted it with sullen-

ness into the lock, turned it sharply, and threw open the door.

Ralph Romaine came out with a cry of triumph, and a moment later Jerry found himself hurled into the room, and heard a key turned on him!

CHAPTER XV.

BUCK STICKS TO HIS SCHEME.

JERRY JASPER became furious when he found himself a prisoner in the room that had opened its door to the victim of Buck Bronson's trap. The events of the past few minutes had completely sobered him.

"What a fool I was for not dusting when I had a chance!" he exclaimed, mad at himself. "I suppose I will be kept here till the authorities arrive and pull me in for assisting to defraud, and heaven knows for what else. Can't I get out of this place? By Jupiter! there's the transom! I think I can wriggle through it."

Capital Ben and the Baltimorean were leaving the grounds when the rascally lawyer divested himself of some of his outer clothing, and attacked the transom, his only avenue of escape.

The only chair in the room helped him to the goal of his ambition, and he was soon pushing through the opening.

When midway he stuck, and all his efforts to proceed an inch further proved futile.

Nor could he get back, though he tried with all his might.

Jerry was "in a fix," and he began to curse himself and Buck Bronson like a Flemish trooper.

He next began to storm, to raise his voice and to pound the door with his fists; but all in vain.

Nobody came to his rescue and no voice responded to his frantic cries for help.

Meantime the Excelsior Sport and his tool, Dick Dodson, had gone back to Washington proper, bent on running Capital Ben to earth. The two desperadoes recognized the danger that menaced their schemes while the boy was at large.

His reappearance told that he had escaped uninjured from the furious runaway on the Arlington pike, and that, unless he was soon caught and caged the double game would amount to nothing.

The eyes of the two men were on the alert.

They had resolved to resort to the most severe measures. Dick was ready to do anything, and Buck was determined that the Washington Weasel should not baffle him now.

"I would like to know how the boy at the hospital comes on," said Buck to the convict cabman. "The evening paper said he was likely to give me away, and I want to find out if that event is likely to occur soon. Give me tomorrow yet, and the game is mine! The youngster's name is Tad Trimble. He is at the Children's Hospital, in the accident ward. He doesn't know you, Dick. Go there and find out how he is, and report as soon as possible at my room at the Mordaunt."

Dick Dodson hurried away on his mission, and reached the hospital as soon as possible. A cautious inquiry about the wounded boy gained the information that he was likely to recover, and also that he had refused to reveal the name of the man who had almost taken his life.

"This news will suit Buck!" exclaimed the cabman as he turned back. "He can now go on with his game. After to-morrow he will put me on the Avenue again with a new team, and I will feel like somebody once more."

Buck was waiting for his tool in an upstairs room of his hotel. He was alone, but had wine and cigars on his table.

All at once a knock sounded on his door.

The Excelsior Sport sprung up and hurried across the room. Opening the door cautiously, he found himself face to face with a man whom he did not recognize at first.

"I am Henry Trego of Romaine & Trego," said the man advancing into the room.

A sudden flash took possession of Buck Bronson's eyes.

"Be seated Mr. Trego," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

The villain was coolness itself, and he knew that he was in the presence of Ralph Romaine's partner.

The banker took a chair and went on:

"You will pardon me, but I know that you are the Mr. Dubois who engaged to borrow fifty thousand of us a few days ago. Mr. Romaine came here with the money, and has not returned."

"Well?" asked Buck without moving a muscle.

"I am willing to compromise," continued.

Trego. "I don't want any publicity in this matter. I will not have the house dragged into any controversy—we can't afford it. If you will give us the securities agreed upon we will let the loan stand."

Buck Bronson could hardly keep back a smile. He leaned back in his chair and looked coolly at the man before him. He seemed to measure his physical strength by a close scrutiny from head to foot.

"Where is Mr. Romaine?" Buck suddenly asked.

"Ah! that we do not know," was the reply. "I will transact all necessary business."

"He was to have done it."

Trego started.

"What! haven't you seen him since he came to Washington?" he cried.

"No; did he really come?"

The Baltimore banker almost leaped from his chair.

"Yes! He came the night agreed upon," he answered. "I believe you met him at the depot."

"I?" cried Buck, leaning forward. "See here; this is a serious charge if Mr. Romaine has mysteriously disappeared. You don't want to get me into trouble, Henry Trego. I understand that you have been here sometime. Why haven't you tried to unearth the scheme you hint at?"

"The honor of the house, sir—"

"Fiddlesticks!" interrupted Buck. "Would you take ten thousand dollars and let the matter drop?"

"I'd rather have papers securing the whole loan."

Buck burst into a laugh.

"Give me the fifty thousand dollars I was to have borrowed, and the papers are yours!" he cried. "By the way, you'd sooner have the loan secured than find Romaine, wouldn't you?"

Henry Trego's face grew red.

"Go home, or tell the police all you know or suspect, and bring your house before the people by its loose way of doing business," the Washington sport went on. "I still want the fifty thousand, but I don't give up the securities before I get it. Mr. Romaine probably went further on. As to my meeting him at the depot—who told you this?"

The Baltimorean stammered and looked down.

"Very well! I've got enemies in this town, and you've probably found them. No, sir! I haven't seen Mr. Romaine. I can give you no information concerning him. I have lost money by not getting the loan bargained for. I can come on your house for damages."

Mr. Trego seemed startled by the last remark, and did not try to prolong the interview.

Buck Bronson's coolness had met him at all points, and had outwitted him.

Henry Trego left the sport in a happy frame of mind.

"There's nothing like sticking to a lie when you've got one to suit you!" Buck laughed, when he found himself alone.

A little while after Buck had another visitor more to his liking—Dick Dodson, fresh from the hospital.

"Tad Trimble is likely to hold his secret a few days, which will be long enough!" cried Buck, when Dick had reported. "By to-morrow night I will have a wife, and will be the nominal owner of one hundred thousand dollars. Help yourself to the wine and cigars, Dick. I wonder what has become of Jerry? I haven't seen him since our talk on the Market bridge."

Almost at that very moment a policeman, accompanied by a boy, entered an old house in the suburbs of the city and found a man hanging from the transom above a certain door.

"Hello! here is Jerry!" cried the boy, springing forward, but the next moment he recoiled with a cry. "Great God! this man is dead!"

The officer came up and looked at the transom's prisoner.

Yes, the claims lawyer was dead!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WEASEL'S VICTORY.

CAUGHT in his own trap and unable to extricate himself, Jerry Jasper had met the severest of dooms, death!

Capital Ben and the policeman succeeded in getting the body from its singular position, and left it alone in the old house.

"What are you going to do with the other man?" asked the blue-coat.

"Leave that to me."

"He will be on the lookout for you."

"I am ready for him!" laughed the boy.

"Dick Dodson will also be on the alert."

"So he will, ready to help Buck Bronson in any game that he invents. I owe Dick one for

his desperate attempt to throw me into the Potomac from the aqueduct bridge. When I found the cab being dragged over the Arlington road, I gave myself up for lost, and when I was pitched into a ditch I believed for a while that every bone in my body was broken. But I escaped with a few slight bruises, which I consider a miracle, and I got back to the city as quick as possible. It was fun for me to see Buck pick up the wrong boy and throw him into Dick's buggy, and when the sport started off, I knew he would take me to the Baltimore banker. Don't you think I'm able to hoe my own row?" and Capital Ben looked up into the officer's face and laughed.

"You seem to be," was the reply.

The young spotter, once more in Washington, had cause for keeping his eyes open.

He knew that he had to deal with two decidedly dangerous men, and that he must not relax his vigilance for a moment.

All at once his keen eyes caught sight of a man who recognized him at the same time. It was Dick Dodson!

The next moment Capital Ben had covered the distance between Dick Dodson and himself, and in a stern voice he spoke to the cabman:

"Don't attempt to elude me, Dick. If you step from my side before I give permission, I'll blow the Sing Sing story."

The man ground his teeth and looked madly at the boy.

The pair continued down the street for a moment, when Capital Ben called a policeman.

The convict driver started back, but the boy covered him with his finger.

"I want that man held!" the boy said.

"For what?"

"Attempted murder."

In another instant Dick Dodson was in the officer's hands.

"I'll settle for this!" he grated, glaring at the boy.

"Yes, but the settlement will not be made before your return from Sing Sing," and Capital Ben turned and walked away.

At the hour of ten the next day Miss Florence Worcester, of Fourteenth street, heard the tinkling tones of her door-bell.

The young lady seemed to be waiting for some one, and she quickly hurried to the door.

Buck Bronson was on the step, a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth.

Florence received him with more cordiality than he evidently expected.

"I am here for the last time," began Buck, turning upon the beautiful girl in the parlor.

"I don't want to deal the blow I referred to when last here. It will crush you, and your mother, Florence. I have come to give you one more chance."

"What is that?" asked the girl.

"Become my wife to-day and I will burn the compromising papers in your sight."

The judge's daughter was silent for a moment.

"I never could believe that father was guilty of this felony," she cried. "If you have the papers—"

"Here they are," exclaimed Buck, tapping his breast where a certain fullness denoted an inside pocket. "The proof is overwhelming."

"You found the papers in father's desk, you say?"

"I did."

"What are those papers?"

"Certain forged copies of wills intrusted to his keeping."

"I am very sorry," said Florence with a smile that puzzled the Excelsior Sport. "I have a packet here that might interest you."

As she finished she stepped to a little stand the drawer of which she opened before the sport.

"Here are papers which were found late last night," she went on, placing a package of folded papers on the table. "These are the wills with which my father dealt."

Buck Bronson started, but soon came to his own rescue.

"I do not doubt that, but the papers I hold are the wills he used—the forged ones!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Florence. "Father wrote the documents he executed. In all the genuine wills you will find a private mark peculiarly his own. The key to that mark is in this package."

"Who have you employed to do this work?" he asked, unabashed by the girl's words. "Why, I can break down all this play. You don't think to shield your father by work of this kind, do you? What is your final answer, Florence? I laugh at that package and its contents. Found late last night, eh? Perhaps! The man you have called to your aid did not complete his work till then, I suppose. Become my wife to-

day, or I crush the Worcester name, and send you disgraced into the streets of Washington!"

Buck Bronson could not help noticing that the eyes of the girl flashed indignantly.

"This seems to be your last play," she cried. "And you make it alone?"

"I make all my moves alone."

"The last play your partner, Jerry Jasper, made was alone also."

The Excelsior Sport started toward the girl.

"What do you mean?"

"He died alone in the old house last night."

"Who says so?"

"One of the persons who found him dead in the trap he caught himself in."

As Florence spoke she stepped quickly to a door near by and flung it open.

"I found your pard in the trap, Buck Bronson!" exclaimed a voice, as a boy stepped into the room, and threw up the glittering barrel of a revolver.

"The Washington Weasel!" cried the Excelsior Sport.

"And your late prisoner also," said another voice, and Buck uttered a startling cry as he staggered from Ralph Romaine, the Baltimorean!

"You are right, Buck—this is your last play," continued Capital Ben, whose bright eyes seemed to dance with delight. "The papers on the table I found myself in a secret compartment in the wall of Judge Worcester's office. Their existence with his private mark on them, proves your papers to be forgeries, made to help out your double game. You will be wanted for a more serious crime than forgery. The few drops of prussic acid which you poured into my fever drops at Mrs. Seeley's will end your career for a time at least."

"Who says I did that?" demanded the man standing almost against the wall of the parlor with eyes aglare like a tiger's.

"Sally, the sleep-walker of the house will say it," replied Ben. "The contents of the tumbler have been analyzed, and the results sustain the girl. I guess the game is up. Your scheme against the Baltimore bankers netted you fifty thousand, slick and clean; but the last play is a failure. Where's the wife and the hundred thousand, Buck?"

There was no reply.

"Do you want my answer now?" asked Florence, smiling.

"No! the fight is not yet at an end!" cried the thunderstruck sport.

"Not with Dick under arrest?" asked Capital Ben. "Come, Mr. Bronson. We want to see you safe in the hands of the law. You won't burn your papers in Miss Florence's presence. Mr. Romaine is willing to lose his share of the fifty thousand."

"Indeed I am," answered the young banker. "You played the scheme well, Dubois, or Bronson, whichever you are. The police will be called in now. If you move a hand or attempt to escape, the boy who has spoiled your game will touch the trigger!"

Capital Ben grinned behind his revolver, and Ralph Romaine went to the door.

Buck saw that the game was up.

Cool to the last, the Excelsior Sport went to prison with several ugly charges over his head. The double game had met with an ignominious failure, thanks to Capital Ben, the tireless young spotter of Washington.

Buck Bronson was tried on the most serious charge, and sent to prison for twenty years.

Dick Dodson, the convict cabman, also went up for a good term for his attempted murder of Capital Ben on the Potomac River bridge.

Tad Trimble, the bootblack spy, came out of the hospital at last in good shape, and plies his double vocation as of old.

Henry Trego, Ralph Romaine's partner, proved a defaulter, thus proving Buck Bronson's assertion that he was guilty of some crime. He fled from Baltimore before Romaine returned, and never came back to pay for his villainy.

A short time ago the fair Florence became the wife of Buck Bronson's prisoner, and the most interested wedding-guest was a well-dressed boy with keen black eyes.

This boy had vindicated Judge Worcester's name by finding the long-missing wills, thus destroying the insult which the Excelsior Sport intended to heap upon the family if he failed in his double game.

Capital Ben was well rewarded for his splendid work, and he is still to be found in Washington, ready to take a hand in the ferreting out and the punishment of crime.

THE END.

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